



## Considering Today's Meaning of the *Amidah*

I recently attended the annual Women Cantors Network conference held this year in the historic village of Ridgefield, Connecticut whose rich history goes back to before the American revolution. Being in a place so resonant with American history made me mindful of our very strong American-

based Jewish denominations within Judaism, especially because the Women Cantors Network organization is transdenominational and open to all persuasions of Jewish practice. I consider it a privilege that my annual attendance at this conference affords me the opportunity at least once a year to hear many innovative approaches to traditional liturgy in what I call a 'New Key.' Every Jewish denomination is represented, except Orthodox, the only movement that still does not embrace women as rabbis or cantors

In addition to synagogue cantors, music educators, cantorial soloists, and composers from Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Jewish Renewal movements, many of the attendees working in congregations that are 'post-denominational', that is, congregations that have chosen to be unaffiliated or, even if affiliated, to expand their vision of Jewish ritual practice to include aspects of the rich traditions of other denominations. I think this is a true reflection of 'Minhag America' or 'American Jewish tradition,' as 21st century American Jewish religious practice calls upon each of us to find new meaning for our experience of Judaism and being Jewish in a New Key.

Among the many exhilarating and inspiring aspects of this conference attended by cantors from all over the country and Canada, filled with music, spiritual energy and new learning, are the opportunities to experience numerous prayer services of various times of day, specifically weekday *Ma'ariv* (evening) and *Shacharit* (morning), led by different members from the various denominations. I always enjoy bringing back to B'nai Jacob new melodies and new settings of familiar prayer texts that have been shared during these conferences..

This year, I was struck by a *Shacharit* weekday service as presented by a cantor from Massachusetts using the Reform *Gates of Prayer* slim grey siddur for weekday and Shabbat. It incorporates all the essential prayers of our traditional weekday *Shacharit* service, but simplified. The musical accompaniment provided by the cantor leading the service was on guitar and felt very spiritual and uplifting. I'd like to share some details about the content of the *Amidah* as presented at this service as I felt it made the *Amidah* most meaningful for us all as contemporary worshippers.

Unlike the English translations of our *Siddur Sim Shalom* which are on the opposing page of the Hebrew texts, the *Gates of Prayer* English translations are incorporated on both sides of the open book intermingled with the Hebrew text, almost alternating, so one cannot help but glance at the English, as well as the Hebrew. In fact, I think the reader is expected to read both the Hebrew and the English. Our B'nai Jacob congregants might find this actually refreshing, especially since some of our congregants are not readers of Hebrew, and since most of our congregants do not understand the Hebrew, even if they can read it. In our B'nai Jacob services we do not have much time to read the English as we dash real-time through the *davening* in Hebrew, especially in the *Birchot Ha'Shachar* and *P'seukei D'zimrah*.

I was particularly struck by the presentation of the *Gates of Prayer Amidah*, the *Shmoneh Esreh*, the silent meditation we recite three times a day in the Conservative tradition. Each paragraph had a heading in both Hebrew and English, and by this very striking graphical presentation in the prayerbook, we are clearly reminded of our Jewish values. I'd like to lay out those headings for you to reflect upon, but before doing so, I will provide a brief explanation of the history of the *Amidah* and its structure, as you may not be familiar with this.

The *Amidah*, also known as the *Shmoneh Esreh*, is the centerpiece of all of our prayer services regardless of time of day, and whether weekday, Shabbat, or Yom Tov. It is comprised of a set of benedictions - blessings- recited silently by individuals, and then sometimes repeated by the *Hazzan*, usually on Shabbat and holidays. '*Amidah*' literally means 'that which is recited standing' from the Hebrew verb root '*Omed*' 'stand'. '*Shmoneh Esreh*' is Hebrew for the number 18. (In gematria, of course, 18 is *Chet Yud* or '*Chai*', 'Life'.) Originally there were eighteen distinct benedictions or blessings in the weekday *Amidah* each terminating with the traditional *beracha* that commences, '*Baruch Atah Adonai...*' When a nineteenth was added in later centuries, the designation '*Shmoneh Esreh*' was not changed. So in a sense, *Shmoneh Esreh* became a misnomer. Nonetheless, it's '*minhag*', tradition, so we stick with it. There are a number of discrepancies in text, depending on denomination and prayerbook, for certain paragraphs because of variations in accepted beliefs. Probably the most common that we know of is the use of *Emahot* (our female ancestral mothers) in the opening paragraph which we include in B'nai Jacob services, but *Siddur Sim Shalom* provides two versions, one with and one without.

According to Ismar Elbogen in his scholarly examination of Hebrew liturgy, *Jewish Liturgy*, first written in German in the late 19th century and then translated into Hebrew and eventually into English in the late 20th century, the *Amidah* was probably originally composed and compiled during the *Mishnaic* period, both before and after the destruction of the Second Temple. It is discussed primarily in Chapters 4 and 5 of *Berachot* in the *Talmud*, in chapters 4-5 of *Hilkhot Tefilah* in the *Mishna Torah*, and Laws 89-127 of the *Shulchan Aruch*.

The first three and the last three benedictions are well known to all of us (including *Eloheh Avraham*, etc. and *Sim Shalom*), so it is the middle thirteen blessings from the *Gates of Prayer* weekday morning service referenced earlier whose structure I would like to present for your reflection here. Please note that there are a few textual differences from our *Sim Shalom* siddur and, if you are interested, feel free to ask me about them. Still, the central ideas are the same:

- Binah*** – from the Hebrew verb 'L'Haveen' – **Understanding**  
This is a petition to God to grant wisdom and understanding
- Teshuvah*** – from the Hebrew verb 'La'Shuv' – **Returning**  
In this paragraph we ask God to help Jews return to a life based on the Torah, and praise God as a God of Repentance
- Selichah*** – from the Hebrew verb 'L'Sloach' – **Forgiving**  
We ask for forgiveness for all sins, and praise God as being a God of forgiveness.
- Geulah*** – **Redemption**  
This praises God as a rescuer of the people Israel.
- Refuah*** – **Healing**  
This is a prayer to heal the sick
- Birkat HaShanim*** – **Abundance**, lit. blessing for years

This prayer asks God to bless the produce of the earth.

***Cherut* – Freedom**

This prayer asks God to liberate the oppressed.

***Mishpat* – Justice**

This prayer asks God to bestow his spirit on the world's rulers and judges so that love and compassion will be among us.

***Al Ha'Rashah* – On Evil**

This prayer asks God to vanish evil from the earth.

***Al Ha'Tzadikim* – On the Righteous**

This prayer asks God to have mercy on all who trust in Him, and asks for support for the righteous.

***Bo'Neh Yerushalayim***

**– Builder of Jerusalem**

This prayer asks God to let His presence be manifest in Jerusalem and have peace within its gates.

***Yeshuah* – Deliverance**

This prayer asks God to cause the light of deliverance to dawn for all the world.

***Shomeah Tefilah* – Hearer of Prayer**

This prayer asks God to hear our voices and hear our prayers.

In our very busy lives, we don't often get the chance to think about our spiritual values in such a focused and concrete way, which is why I feel this is such a special set of *berakhot*. It is important for us all to remember these central themes of our weekday morning *Amidah* because those themes speak to our most basic Jewish values: understanding, a life based on Torah values, forgiveness, redemption, healing, abundance, freedom, justice, banishment of evil, rewarding the righteous, bringing peace to Jerusalem and deliverance for all the world, and finally, having our prayers heard.

As we slowly move from the month of Av to Elul this summer, observing Tisha B'Av mourning the destruction of our holy temples, and then enter into that holy month leading up to the High Holidays, I encourage us all to reflect on these themes as we pray as a congregation and as individuals seeking spiritual fulfillment in our lives. I wish everyone a Happy Summer with many sunny days!

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