

Or Hadash, 2 commentaries
on
Siddur Sim Shalom for
Shabbat and Festivals

Introduction to the Siddur



Prayer is an ancient part of human worship, but Jewish prayer is unique in having been separated from all other ritual forms — magic, incantations, sacrifices — which, in paganism, were always part of any worship service. Judaism, however, has had a different understanding of the nature of God. The God of Israel is above nature and not susceptible to coercion or control by these ritual means. Two different methods of worship evolved in Judaism: sacrificial worship, concentrated eventually in the Temple, in which offerings were brought to express the deepest feelings of the human being — thanksgiving, praise, confession of sin; and verbal worship by the individual or the group. Verbal worship, unlike sacrifice, could be offered freely by any individual at any time and any place. Eventually this verbal worship was formalized into the services that are contained in the siddur. It includes both prayer and formal study of Torah.

Indeed, prayer — turning to God with words alone, unaccompanied by sacrifice — is as old as Judaism itself. The Bible is replete with such prayers and one entire book, Psalms, is devoted totally to such prayer. Most of the prayers recorded in the Torah, the narrative books, and the prophets are private, individual prayers. The Book of Psalms is a more formal collection, written by professionals. Some of the psalms seem to have been written for recitation by the community at gatherings at the Temple, yet none of this can be called a *siddur*, from the Hebrew root *s-d-r*, meaning “order.” A “siddur” implies a specific order of prayer to be recited at specific times.

During the period of the First Temple, public worship was almost entirely sacrificial. During the time of the first Exile and the subsequent Return (sixth century B.C.E.), prayer became more and more important. Nevertheless, during the period of the Second Temple, the sacrificial service in the Temple continued to dominate Jewish worship. Toward the end of that time the synagogue emerged as an independent institution of worship without sacrifices. Most of what went on there may have been study of Torah, but prayer was not totally absent. Some of the major components of the siddur, the Sh'ma and the Amidah, began to emerge during that time. Following the destruction in 70 C.E. prayer became the major — indeed the only — form of public worship, and was made mandatory. As a result, the structure and

content of the siddur was gradually developed, assuming a form similar to that which we have only in the period of the Geonim (the heads of the academies in Babylonia and the Land of Israel, sixth through eleventh centuries), with further changes and additions in the Middle Ages. The siddur was not created by any one person. In fact we have no idea who wrote most of the prayers that are found in it. Many of them are selections from the Bible, while many others make extensive use of biblical phrases. Thus they are largely creations of the Sages based upon the Bible but encompassing the basic concepts of Rabbinic Judaism.

In order to understand the substance and the structure of the siddur, it is helpful to know that sometime between the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel (sixth century B.C.E.) and the redaction of the Mishnah (200 C.E.) two basic components of non-sacrificial worship developed. The first was what we call today *K'riat Sh'ma*, The Recitation of the Sh'ma. This consists of passages from the Torah preceded and followed by appropriate blessings. Originally there were four sections; one of them, the Ten Commandments, was eventually eliminated. The three that remain contain basic doctrines of Judaism: monotheism, God's providence and redemption, as well as the admonition to study Torah and observe the *mitzvot*. These passages are to be recited both in the evening and in the morning, based on the rabbinic interpretation of the verse "Recite them at home or away, night and day" (Deuteronomy 6:7). These biblical sections are preceded by two blessings praising God as the Author of creation and the Giver of the Torah, and followed by a blessing affirming the truth of the biblical readings, the reliability of God's word, and praising God as the Redeemer. In the evening there is an additional blessing asking for God's protection. The primary purpose of the Sh'ma is to inculcate our acceptance of God's word, as found in the Torah, and to invoke our acceptance of God's sovereignty and God's commands. Since Judaism is a religion built upon a book, this recitation from the Book is an appropriate expression of our basic beliefs. (See the Introduction to the Sh'ma, pages xxi-xxiv.)

The other component is a unit of prayer in which we address God, praising God, petitioning the Almighty for our needs, and thanking and acknowledging God. This prayer is known as the *Amidah*, the "standing prayer." The Sages decreed that this should be recited three times daily — evening, morning, and afternoon. These correspond to natural divisions of the day. The morning and afternoon *Amidah* also parallel the times when the public *tamid* offerings were brought in the Temple. At least some of these blessings existed long before the year 70 C.E. and all of them were composed before the end of the first century. (See the Introduction to the *Amidah*, pages xxiv-xxvi.) During this early period, however, there was great flexibility. An outline of what was to be said existed, but individuals and leaders of the service could formulate the words in their own way.

Thus there were five times during the day when the observant Jew was to worship: twice reciting the Sh'ma, listening to God's word, and three times addressing God through the *Amidah*. Eventually these five were combined into three services: the evening Sh'ma and *Amidah*, the morning Sh'ma and *Amidah*, and the afternoon *Amidah*. Over time, to these were added various preliminary sections and concluding prayers, yielding the structure of prayer we have in our siddur today. To this basic layer was added the work of the Geonim, the leaders of Babylonian Jewry, who finalized the form of many of these prayers and added sections of their own. Other sections were added over the centuries, but no major changes were made — with

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