The Way Into

Jewish Prayer

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There are three kinds of fixed prayer, depending on the location in which it occurs: in synagogue, at home, and in our everyday experience of the world—like seeing a rainbow, hearing good news, or having the opportunity to perform a commandment. Judaism is built on the bedrock belief that the supreme act of God's love was the gift of Torah and the commandments it contains. Each commandment *(mitzvah* in Hebrew, pronounced meetz-VAH, or, commonly, MITZ-vah) is the opportunity to perform God's will, to add goodness to the world, and to enhance our own lives by a sense of increased holiness. Our experience both of beholding the world and of performing commandments evokes age-old Jewish patterns of appreciation.

The Pattern of Prayer

Synagogue liturgy can seem confusing, more like a shapeless mass of verbiage than a carefully constructed whole; a jumble of noise, not a symphony; a blotch of random colors, hardly a masterpiece of art. But prayer is an art form, and like the other arts, the first step to appreciating it is recognizing its patterns.

Fixed synagogue prayer takes place three times daily: morning (*Shacharit*), afternoon (*Minchah*), and evening (*Ma'ariv* or, less commonly, *arvit*). For the sake of convenience, the latter two are usually recited in tandem, one service just before dark, and the other immediately after the sun sets. All three follow the same basic structure, but the morning service is the most complete. It is composed of seven consecutive units that build upon each other to create a definitive pattern. The words of each unit remained fluid for centuries, but the structural integrity of the service has remained sacrosanct since the beginning.

Services are made of prayers, but not all prayers are alike. Some are biblical quotations, ranging in size from a single line to entire chapters, usually psalms. There are rabbinic citations also,

chunks of Mishnah or Talmud that serve as a sort of Torah study within the service. Medieval poetry occurs here too, straightforward hymns or older staples marked less by rhyme and rhythm than by clever word plays and alphabetic acrostics. And there are long passages of prose, the work again of medieval spiritual masters, but couched in standard rabbinic style without regard to poetic rules.

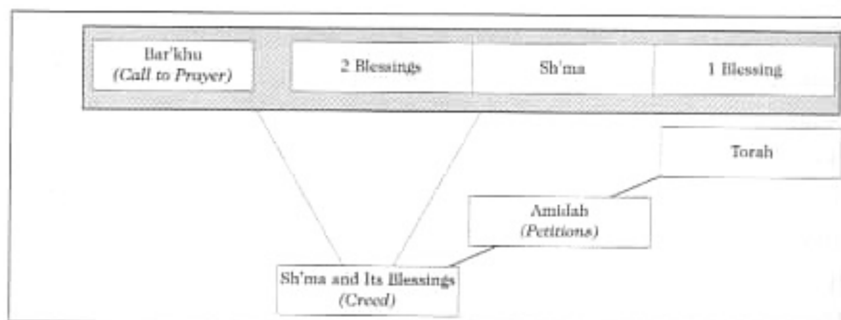
Most of all, however, the *siddur* is filled with blessings, a uniquely rabbinic vehicle for addressing God, and the primary liturgical expression of Jewish spirituality. We will have much more to say about blessings later. For now we can take a glance at their structure so as to appreciate their uniqueness.

Blessings (known also as benedictions, or, in Hebrew, *b'rakhot*—sing., *b'rakhah*) come in two formats. Later in this chapter we will look at some "short blessings," the one-line formulas that are customarily recited before eating, for instance, or prior to performing a commandment. But there are "long blessings" too, generally whole paragraphs or even sets of paragraphs on a given theme. These are best thought of as small theological essays on such topics as deliverance, the sanctity of time, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the like. They sometimes start with the words *Barukh atah Adonai*...("Blessed are You, Adonai..."—"Adonai" being God's "name," sometimes rendered as "Lord"), and then they are easily spotted. But more frequently, they begin with no particular verbal formula, and are hard to identify until their last line, which invariably does say, *Barukh atah Adonai*...("Blessed are You, Adonai...") followed by a short synopsis of the blessing's theme ("...who sanctifies the Sabbath," "...who hears prayer," and so forth). This final summarizing sentence is called a *chatimah*, meaning a "seal," like the seal made from a signet ring that seals an envelope.

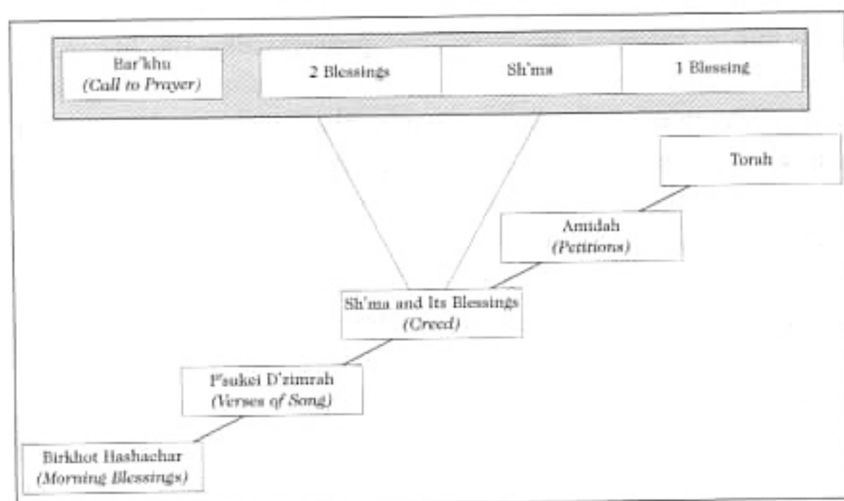
The bulk of the service as it was laid down in antiquity consists of strings of blessings, one after the other, or of biblical quotations bracketed by blessings that introduce and conclude them. By the tenth century, the creation of blessings largely ceased,

and eventually, Jewish law actually opposed the coining of new ones, on the grounds that post-talmudic Judaism was too spiritually unworthy to try to emulate the literary work of the giants of the Jewish past. Not all Jews agree with that assessment today, but the traditional liturgy contains no blessings dated later than the tenth century.

At the liturgy's core are three large units: *Sh'ma* and Its Blessings, the *Amidah*—also known as the *T'fillah* or *Sh'moneh Esrei*—and the public reading of the Torah. The *Sh'ma* and Its Blessings and the *Amidah* were recited every day; Torah is read on Monday and Thursday (market days in antiquity), when the crowds were likely to gather in the cities, and on Shabbat and holidays, of course. The *Sh'ma* and Its Blessings is essentially the Jewish creed, a statement of what Jews have traditionally affirmed about God, the cosmos and our human relationship to God and to history. It is a conversation largely *about* God. By contrast, the *Amidah*—which, on ordinary weekdays, though not on Shabbat and holidays, is largely petitionary—should be thought of as a conversation *with* God. The Torah reading is a recapitulation of Sinai, an attempt to discover the will of God through sacred scripture. Since the *Sh'ma* and Its Blessings begins the official service, it opens with a communal call to prayer. We should picture these units building upon each other in a crescendo-like manner, as follows:



It is, however, hard for individuals who are normally distracted by everyday concerns to constitute a community given over wholeheartedly to prayer. Already in the second century, therefore, we hear of some Rabbis who assembled prior to the morning service's actual Call to Prayer in order to sing psalms of praise known as *Hallel*; and even before that—at home, not the synagogue—it was customary to begin the day immediately upon awakening by reciting a series of daily blessings along with some study texts. By the ninth century, if not earlier, these two units too had become mandatory, and the home ritual for awakening had moved to the synagogue, which is where we have it today. The warm-up section of psalms before *Shacharit* is called *P'sukei D'zimrah*—meaning "Verse of Song"—and the prior recital of daily blessings and study texts is called *Birkhot Hashachar*—"Morning Blessings." Since they now precede the main body of the service, gradually building up to it, the larger diagram can be charted like this:

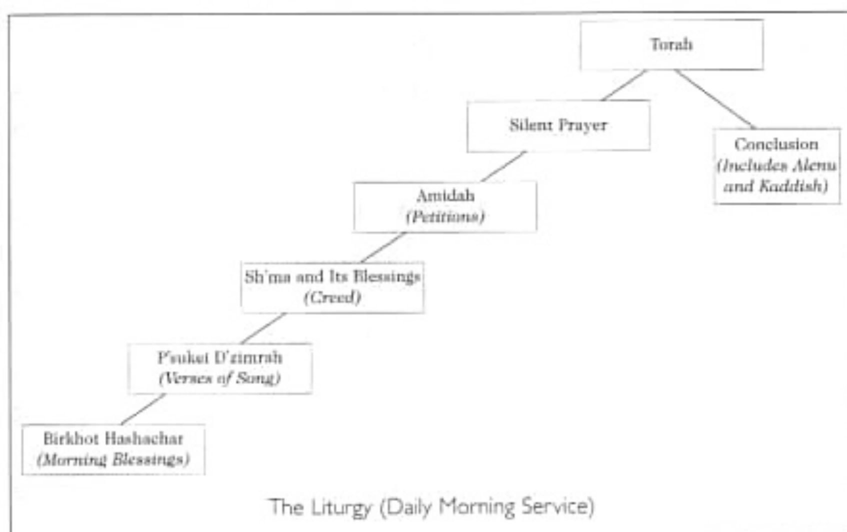


Two other expansions of this basic structure probably occurred in the first two centuries C.E., although our evidence for their being that early is less certain.

First, a Conclusion was added. It featured a final prayer called the Kaddish (kah-DEESH or, commonly, KAH-dish), meaning "sanctification." Later the Kaddish would come to be associated with mourning, but originally it merely closed the service, by looking ahead to the coming of God's ultimate reign of justice. Eventually other prayers were added to the Conclusion, including the *Alenu* (pronounced ah-LAY-noo), which had been composed as an introduction to the blowing of the ram's horn, or *shofar* (pronounced shoh-FAHR or, commonly, SHOH-fahr), on the New Year (Rosh Hashanah), but was moved here in the Middle Ages.

Second, the Rabbis, who were keenly aware of the limits of human mortality, advised all Jews to come to terms daily with their frailty and ethical imperfection. To do so, they provided an opportunity for a silent confession following the *Amidah*. In time, this evolved into silent prayer in general, an opportunity for individuals to assemble their most private thoughts before God; and later still, sometime in the Middle Ages, it expanded on ordinary weekdays into an entire set of supplicatory prayers called the *Tachanun*.

The daily service was thus passed down to us with shape and design. Beginning with daily blessings that celebrate the new day and emphasize the study of sacred texts (*Birkhot Hashachar*), it continues with songs and psalms (*P'sukei D'zimrah*) designed to create a sense of community. There then follows the core of the liturgy: an official call to prayer (our *Bar'khu*), the recital of Jewish belief (the *Sh'ma* and Its Blessings) and communal petitions (the *Amidah*). Individuals then pause to speak privately to God in silent prayer (later expanded into *Tachanun*), and then, on select days, they read as a community from the Torah. The whole concludes with a final Kaddish to which other prayers, most notably the *Alenu*, were added eventually.



The Liturgy (Daily Morning Service)

On Shabbat and holidays, this basic structure expands to admit special material relevant to the day in question, and contracts to omit prayers that are inappropriate for the occasion. On Shabbat, for instance, the petitions of the *Amidah* are excluded, as Shabbat is felt to be so perfect in itself as to make petitioning unnecessary. But an entire service is added, a service called *Musaf* (literally, "Addition"), to correspond to the extra sacrifice that once characterized Shabbat worship in the Temple. Similarly, a prophetic reading called the *Haftarah* (hahf-tah-RAH or, commonly, hahf-TOH-rah) joins the Torah reading, and extra psalms and readings for the Sabbath are inserted here and there. The same is true for holidays when, in addition, numerous *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) get said, especially on the High Holy Days, when the sheer size of the liturgy seems to get out of hand. But even there, the basic structure remains intact, so that once we are familiar with its intrinsic shape we can get beyond what looks like random verbiage to find genius behind the liturgy's design.

The structure, history and meaning of Judaism's still-evolving 2,000-year-old liturgy is itself a large and fascinating topic that

can only be alluded to here. A fuller account is available in a series that can be considered a companion to this volume: *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries* (Jewish Lights).

At any rate, beyond the "what" of prayer—its contents and structure—there is the "where" of prayer—the place where Jews actually pray. Many Jews who cannot find a community that meets regularly each day for services will go through the appropriate prayerbook service alone. Because the prayerbook service has been planned for communal participation, however, many Jews prefer to go out of their way to find voluntary gatherings for worship. For years now, in New York's Lower East Side, a handful of people has been assembling for prayer in a simple storefront every working day. Still, the storefront is only a makeshift transitory community, and the ideal situation is a regular praying community in a synagogue. The "where" of prayer therefore begins with consideration of the synagogue.

First, There Is the Synagogue

As explained earlier in this chapter, fixed synagogue prayer takes place three times daily: morning *(Shacharit*, pronounced shah-khah-REET or, commonly, SHAH-khah-reet), afternoon *(Minchah,* pronounced meen-KHAH or, commonly, MIN-khah), and evening *(Ma'ariv,* pronounced mah-ah-REEV or, commonly, MAH-ah-reev). Later we will look at what the prayers say and how they are said, but for now we shall focus on the centrality of the synagogue for Judaism generally and Jewish prayer in particular.

We do not know exactly when or how synagogues came into being, but they do not go as far back as people like to think. They postdate the biblical era, which ended some time in the fifth century B.C.E.; were common by the first century C.E.; and may go back a century or two before that, at most. The word is from the Greek