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Prayer: Expression of the Soul

Prayer is connecting with God through our words. According to Jewish tradition, prayer goes all the way back to Adam, and continues through the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, Moses, and many more early biblical figures. Prayer was, and continues to be, a most natural manifestation of our relationship with God. However, it was King David who revolutionized prayer through the gift that he bequeathed to us, the Psalms.

The Book of Psalms is largely a collection of David's own personal prayers. They are powerful and deep, running the gamut of emotions and human experiences. It was David, *"the hero of Israel's songs"* (2 Samuel 23:1), who instituted the practice of worship accompanied by soul-stirring music and inspirational words. In essence, David created the foundation for liturgy, though it would take centuries for his Psalms to become any kind of formal prayer text.

Prayer has always had a prominent place in Judaism. Until David, it was always spontaneous, personal, and mostly private. This kind of prayer, still practiced today, has its benefits. It is often the most heartfelt and most powerful. However, the Psalms create a valuable alternative pathway through which we can connect with God.

It was only natural that when the Jewish sages (a group of renowned scholars who over the centuries have provided commentary and teachings related to the *Torah*) began to create a set text for prayer at the end of the Second Temple period that David's psalms were included.

Part of what makes the Psalms so unique is that they are both our word to God, yet as part of the Bible, they are also undeniably God's word to us. This unique combination makes the Psalms a way we can meet God in the most profound way.



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*Let everything
that has breath
praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD.*

— PSALM 19:14



The Shema — A Mission Statement for Life

The *Shema* is a fundamental Jewish prayer. It is usually the first prayer that we learn as small children and the last prayer on the lips before one departs from this world. It is written in the *mezuzah*, the small encasement that is affixed to the doorposts of every Jewish home, and inside the *tefillin*, the small black boxes that observant Jewish men place on their arm and heads during prayer.

Saying the *Shema* prayer is a biblical mandate. Its words are mentioned in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The *Shema* encapsulates the basic tenets of Judaism — that there is one God and it is He alone whom we serve. This prayer is a commitment, an affirmation, and what the Jewish sages call “an acceptance of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

In addition, there are two letters written extra large in this verse — the last letters of both the first and last words of the *Shema*. The first word of the prayer, *shema*, means “listen.” The last letter of that word, the Hebrew letter *ayin*, is written extra large. The last word of the *Shema* is *echad*, meaning “one.” The last letter of this word is *dalet*, and it, too, is written extra large. Together these letters spell the word *eid*, pronounced “aid,” meaning “witness.”

In essence, the very way in which the *Shema* is written emphasizes its underlying principle and core message: When we say the *Shema*, we are testifying to the truth that there is one God and that we are committed to Him.

As early as Temple times, three more paragraphs were added to the *Shema*, each containing a major precept of Jewish theology. The first paragraph, from Deuteronomy 6:5–9, which follows the *Shema* verse itself, speaks of loving God. The second, from Deuteronomy 11:13–21, speaks of obedience and reminds us that God will reward or punish us in response to our actions.

The final paragraph from Numbers 15:37–41 invokes the directive to wear ritual tassels that serve to remind us of our commitment to God and not to stray into sin. This final paragraph also recalls the Exodus from Egypt, something that Jews are required to remember every day.

In short, the *Shema* is the mission statement of the Jewish people. When we recite it twice daily (at a minimum), we reinforce our commitment to God and our partnership with Him in perfecting the world.



*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God,
the LORD is one.*

— DEUTERONOMY 6:4

The Amidah – Standing Before God

Jewish life is saturated with prayer. Just as air fills our lungs so that we can breathe, prayer fills our soul so that we can connect to God. Jewish liturgy includes individual prayers by great rabbis that were shared with others through the generations, psalms that are designated for specific situations, prayers for particular times of the year, and prayers that are recited every day.

However, it wasn't always this way. Originally, prayer was always spontaneous, individual, and private. There was no set liturgy. Yet, there came a time when the Jewish sages felt that it was critical to compose a prayer that Jews everywhere could recite. That prayer is called the *Amidah*.

At first, it was the only formal Jewish prayer in existence, and while we have added many prayers to our prayer book over the centuries, the *Amidah* continues to be the most important prayer that we say. It is recited in all three prayer services of the day (morning, noon, and evening) and is the pinnacle of every service, the apex of our daily communication with God.

The *Amidah* was composed in the fourth century B.C.E. when some Jews began to make their way back to the Holy Land following the Babylonian exile. At that time, with no Temple service to facilitate a connection with God, and with so many Jews still in exile, the leaders of the time decided it was necessary to provide a formal prayer text that all could recite.

Originally, the *Amidah* was comprised of 18 blessings, which is why the *Amidah* is also known as the *Shemona Esrei*, the Hebrew word for 18. The *Amidah*, which has a third name, "The Silent Meditation," begins when we take three steps forward and three steps back, as though we are entering a different realm, the spiritual sphere.

As we do so, we say these words from Psalm 51:15: "Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise." We recite the entire prayer standing with our feet together and whisper the words quietly. We see this same emphasis on silence with Jesus' instructions to his disciples to pray privately. (See Matthew 5:5-8.)

As we pray the *Amidah*, we touch on all three aspects of Jewish prayer: We begin with praise, follow with our requests, and conclude with thanksgiving. We bow humbly before God twice during the first benediction, and twice more later on.

The other two times that we bow during the *Amidah* are after we have made our requests and as we begin the final section of thanking God for all that we have. At this point, after asking for our needs and desires to be met, we must check our ego with another dose of humility. We stand with God while simultaneously submitting to Him.

The *Amidah* concludes when we take three steps backward and then forward once more to signal that we are taking leave of the King and re-entering the physical world, ready to serve and confident in our ability.



*Open my lips Lord,
and my mouth will declare
your praise.*

— PSALM 51:15

The Lord's Prayer

The *Amidah* is not just the first and central prayer of Jewish liturgy, it is also believed to be the basis of the Lord's Prayer, which is perhaps the best-known prayer among Christians.

Jesus' model for prayer (found in Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4), draws inspiration from the *Amidah* and might have been an abbreviated version:



“Our Father, which art in heaven”

The *Amidah* also starts with an acknowledgement of God's fatherhood: “Blessed are you, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob . . .”

“Hallowed be thy name”

This phrase reflects the third of the *Amidah*'s 18 blessings, “Thou art holy and Thy Name is holy and the holy praise Thee daily. Blessed art Thou O Lord, the holy God.”

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”

Asking for God's will to come to pass is a theme in many sections of the *Amidah*. In the *Amidah*, Jews pray, “Reign Thou over us O Lord, Thou alone in lovingkindness and tender mercy and clear us in judgment. Blessed are Thou O Lord the King who lovest righteousness and judgment.”

“Give us this day our daily bread”

In a section about prosperity, the *Amidah* prayer asks, “Bless this year unto us O Lord our God together with every kind of the produce thereof for our welfare.”

“Forgive us our Father for we have sinned, pardon us O our King for we have transgressed, for Thou dost pardon and forgive.”

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”

Forgiveness is a central theme throughout Jewish prayer, and is the topic of the sixth *Amidah* blessing,

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”

This request for deliverance is also seen in the *Amidah*, “Look upon our affliction and plead our cause, and redeem us speedily for your name's sake, for you are a mighty redeemer.”

Whether we use the *Amidah* or the Lord's Prayer, praying words that have been uttered by people of faith for centuries can lead to a rich connection with our eternal, unchangeable God.

The Garments of Prayer

When an observant Jewish man steps into prayer, there are two different "garments" that are traditionally worn. The first is the *tallit*, the prayer shawl, and the other is the *tefillin*, the small black boxes strapped to the head and arm.

The *tallit* comes from the biblical directive to "to make tassels on the corners of your garments" (Numbers 15:38). The purpose of these tassels is clearly explained in the Bible (and reviewed daily in the *Shema* prayer), "You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes" (Numbers 15:39).

In order to still observe the ritual of wearing these meaningful tassels, it has become customary to wear a specially made, thin, four-cornered undergarment called *tzitzit*, which is also known as the *tallit katan*, "the small cloak." This is worn all day, even if hidden beneath clothing.

However, better known and more widely practiced is the donning of the *tallit gadol*, "the large cloak." Like *tzitzit*, this is an intentionally made four-cornered garment. The *tallit gadol* is more like a shawl than a tunic, but with the same ritual tassels attached on each corner.

Likewise, *tefillin*, ritual black boxes with leather straps which are wrapped around a man's head and arm, are worn to deepen our relationship with the Lord as we pray to Him. *Tefillin* literally means "that which is bound" and is based on the scriptural directive to "Tie them [God's commands] as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads" (Deuteronomy 6:8).

This commandment (also mentioned in the *Shema* prayer) requires men to attach ritual black boxes and straps to their arm, hand, and head every day. The purpose of this mysterious directive is also written in the Scriptures, again so that we might "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads" (Deuteronomy 11:18).

The words referred to in the verse are four sections of the Bible which are written on parchment and placed inside each black box of the *tefillin*. One section contains the story of the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 13:1–10); one is about the requirement to teach our children God's ways (Exodus 13:14–16); one affirms the unity of God (Deuteronomy 6:4–9); and one declares the implications of upholding God's Word (Deuteronomy 11:13–21). When we bind these Scriptures to our bodies, we are literally binding ourselves to God and His will.

As we approach God in prayer, both the *tallit* and *tefillin* help place us in the right frame of mind, ready to commune with God, serve Him, and deepen our connection to Him.



You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostituted yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.

— NUMBERS 15:39

Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

— DEUTERONOMY 6:8

Think About It...

1. **After reading about the Jewish view of prayer, how would you say it compares to the Christian view?** What are the similarities? The differences? How does this contrast enrich your understanding and appreciation of prayer?
2. **How have the Psalms comforted or encouraged you in times of trial?** How does reading the prayers of the psalmists shape your own prayers and your understanding of the role of prayer?
3. **The *Shema* prayer is the fundamental Jewish prayer that encapsulates Jewish theology.** What prayer do you pray that captures the essence of your faith? If you don't have one, consider writing one.
4. **As you read in this study, Jews will sometimes bow and assume other postures, or wear certain items of clothing during prayer.** What practices have you used to symbolize or encourage an attitude of prayer?
5. **How does learning about the Jewish roots of the Lord's Prayer enrich your understanding of it?** How will knowing this context impact your future praying of this prayer?



Apply It

1. **Pray again and again.** Don't ever give up if your prayer isn't answered the first time or the 100th time. We never know which prayer will be the one that unlocks heaven's doors.
2. **Change yourself first.** Before praying, take some time to consider not only what you would like God to change in your life, but also what you might need to change within yourself and in your life.
3. **Prepare for prayer.** While spontaneous prayer is encouraged, it's also helpful at times to approach prayer with preparation. When we are clear on what we are asking for and how to get in touch with our deepest feelings on the matter, our prayers are stronger.
4. **Pray outside in nature.** This practice, which has deep roots in Jewish tradition, makes use of the beauty and majesty of God's world to inspire our prayers and deepen our connection to God.
5. **Establish a daily time (or times) for prayer.** It's so easy to get swept up in the busyness of life and neglect time for prayer. Make an appointment with God each day – then keep it!
6. **Pray all day long.** Prayer, at its core, was always intended to be spontaneous – from our heart straight to God. We always need God's help. When we recognize and remember this, we can imbue our day with prayer.

