

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



*Let everything
that has breath
praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD.*
— Psalm 150:6



Prayer: “Expression of the Soul”

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the renowned 20th-century leader of Yeshiva University in New York City, described prayer as “the expression of the soul that yearns for God, via the medium of the word . . .”

Prayer is connecting with God through our words. According to Jewish tradition, prayer goes all the way back to Adam, and continued 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, Christians and Jews, 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. However, the Psalms aren't exclusively David's compositions. At least ten others contributed to the collection of psalms, including Abraham, Moses, Solomon, and others.

Yet, David is credited with the work because he compiled them and established them as a form of worship. 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.

Most of us cannot find words sufficient enough to praise God. Or we are often rendered speechless when we are going through difficult times. David's psalms give words to our feelings, unlocking our thoughts and emotions so that they may be fully expressed to 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. This is why the Psalms have become so essential in both the Christian and Jewish faiths. They are the words we turn to in our greatest time of need and words of praise we sing in times of jubilation.

Perhaps David's greatest contribution is that he teaches us through the Psalms that we can always praise God no matter what. In the final psalm, he wrote, “*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.*” However, the sages provide an alternative reading of this verse: “Praise the Lord for every breath.” As long as we are alive, there is a way and reason to praise God. Every day is a time to pray, to praise, to thank, to ask, and to connect with our Creator. ■



The *Shema* — A Mission Statement for Life

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

— Deuteronomy 6:4

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.” Technically speaking, this is the entire prayer. A few verses later Moses directs us to talk about these things “when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:7). This was interpreted to mean that we must recite the *Shema* every morning and every evening. On a more symbolic level, this verse teaches us that we must recite this verse daily, when things are looking up and when we are feeling down.

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 (we’ll discuss these more later in this study). 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. As this belief penetrates our heart, mind, and soul, it directs our actions, and ultimately, the course and meaning of our lives. ■

The Jewish Roots of 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 debts, as we forgive our debtors**” – Forgiveness is a central theme throughout Jewish prayer, and is the topic of the sixth *Amidah* blessing, “Forgive us our Father for we have sinned, pardon us O our King for we have transgressed, for Thou dost pardon and forgive.”

“**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 Amidah — Standing Before God

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

— Psalm 51:15

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. Our 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 BCE 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.

This powerful text was written by the men of the Great Assembly, including prophets and sages such as Ezra, Haggai, and Malachi. The *Amidah* is believed to be the basis of The Lord's Prayer, the well-known Christian prayer Jesus gave his original disciples on how to pray. (See sidebar on *The Jewish Roots of the Lord's Prayer*.)

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. Interestingly, the sages taught that we are not to bow more than four times. While we must humbly submit to God, we must also stand confidently as God's partner in creating a better world. In fact, the very word *Amidah* (Hebrew) literally means "standing."

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. If we have prayed the *Amidah* with all our heart and soul, it will carry us through our days, and indeed throughout our entire lives. ■

Visit our Learning Center, ifcj.org/learn, for a full text of the *Amidah* in English. Or watch the introductory video of Rabbi Eckstein reciting the prayer at ifcj.org/welcome.

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?



Tallit and Tefillin — The Garments of 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

Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. — Deuteronomy 6:8

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 *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 ancient times, when most garments were four-cornered tunics, people fulfilled this biblical mandate by placing ritual tassels on their everyday clothing. The tassels served as a constant reminder of their commitment to and relationship with God. However, today, we don’t usually wear four-cornered garments.

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. Before a man begins to pray, he wraps himself in the *tallit*, as though he is wrapping himself in God. We pray while wearing the *tallit* as a symbol of our connection to God and a reminder of our obligation to obey His will.

Many believe that Jesus himself wore the *tallit* with *tzitzit*. In the Christian Bible, the story of a woman who had suffered from bleeding for 12 years is recorded in the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In desperation to be healed, the woman reached out and touched the edge of Jesus’ cloak as he walked through the crowds.

Immediately, she was healed. Many people believe it was the *tzitzit* of Jesus’ prayer shawl that the woman touched.

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. Appropriately, the designated time for putting on *tefillin* became the time of *tefillah*, prayer.

Every morning, as we start each day anew, our heart may desire one thing, our head may think another, and our actions can end up completely different than either. However, the act of wearing *tefillin* is intended to unify the heart, mind, and actions for one singular purpose: the service of God.

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. ■