

Old prayers and New Jews – Part 1

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May we alter the text and format of our prayers because certain rabbis believe that our old prayers are not appropriate for modern society.

Question: In many temples, the form and format of prayer has been altered for they believe that the old prayers are not appropriate for modern society and modern man. What is the opinion of Jewish Law regarding these changes and to the editing and writing of new prayers?

Answer: To clarify my opinion regarding this problem that has been thrust upon me with this question, I must again touch upon a foundation in prayer. עבודה שבלב, represents the penultimate prayer and consists of the great experience which man undergoes when he rendezvouses with the Eternal One. The definition of prayer is to meet with God; even better still, it means a conversation between man and God. Just like prophecy. The difference between prayer and prophecy expresses itself only in the aspect that in prophecy, God calls man to Him and the prophet answers with the term הנה אני, here I am. For example, God called “Abraham, Abraham” and Abraham answered here I am. Similar episodes occurred with Moses and Samuel. With regards to prayer, man takes the initiative and calls to God and the Eternal One responds, “here I am”. However, here too man talks with God. He faces God and addresses Him directly, ברוך אתה, Blessed are You. This concept is a Halachic axiom. According to Jewish law, a person who prays must view himself as if he is standing before the שכינה, the heavenly countenance.

Still, the Halacha was never able to conceptualize or fully understand the rationale and entitlement for prayer in general. The Halacha consistently exhausted itself trying to answer one question: how can man, with all his limitations and small-mindedness, with his impurity and vulgarity, stand and approach God, the Creator of the world, to speak to the One who is absolute, eternal and infinite? How in general can man, who is more אין than יש, more nihility than substance, confront the Eternal One and remain standing? How does man have the temerity to allow himself to plead before God regarding his small, foolish needs? How may he assume the right to praise the Creator of the universe, the One for whom the Psalmist wrote “לך דומי-ה תהלה”, [Note: spoken praise is too limited to express the greatness of God and only

the absence of spoken praise is appropriate to fully praise the exaltedness of God]and offer song and praise to Him ? Is it not absurd that the insignificant praises the infinite and the eternal? Is not Tefila in general paradoxical and incomprehensible and a contradiction to the principle of **לֹא יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי**, that no man may behold the glory of God and survive?

The Halakha did not solve this puzzle. The Chachmei Halacha admitted that they do not understand the idea and concept of prayer and that prayer remains an unsolved riddle. However, they revealed one novel idea. They said: indeed, we do not understand how, and through what ability one conducts prayer, nor do we comprehend the rationale and sense behind it. However, even though we do not understand, we do know that the patriarchs of the Jewish nation and its prophets all prayed. They assumed the right to approach God, to meet and speak with Him, to plead, to praise, to glorify Him and to find themselves in His presence. The Halacha makes us aware of the historical fact that prayer itself is as old as the Jewish Nation, Knesset Yisrael, itself. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob prayed. Moses prayed not only for the nation, as in the prayer of **וַיַּחַל**, but also for his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam. He especially prayed for himself in the tragic, heartfelt **וְאֶתְחַנֵּן**. Chana poured out her heart before God in Shiloh. David's Psalms is a book of prayer and supplication. Solomon prayed at the dedication of the first Temple in Jerusalem. Jonah called to God from the depths of the sea. Hezekiah communed with his Creator in his hour of angst and despair. Daniel prayed three times a day with his face turned towards Jerusalem. Together with our forefathers, kings and prophets, the entire Jewish community prayed; generations everywhere and in all time periods prayed to God.

According to the Chachmei Halacha, we may not declare Tefila de jour, however we cannot doubt in its de facto existence and in the historical fact that Jews always prayed. Therefore, obviously man may, and indeed must, plead before God. He has permission to pour his heart out to Him, and to sing songs and praises, to cling to God like a child clings to his mother, to rest his head down in his mother's lap or on his father's shoulder. The well-known saying in the Talmud (**תפלות אבות תקנום : (ברכות כו: ב)**), our forefathers established our daily prayers, expresses the thought that prayer is an enshrined and engrained precedent set by our forefathers from the dawning of our history and therefore we buttress ourselves with their example to pray as well. We have no other explanation for what permits us to pray. We simply emulate our patriarchs and prophets.

Therefore, we must be very careful to guard our prayer, whether it be in relation to its structure and form or whether it is in relation to the number of times and the times of day that we pray. We must be careful to maintain that which our tradition has given us in terms of the praises and the blessings we offer to God. All these must follow the example set by our forefathers and prophets and the great leaders of the nation whom we imitate. We ourselves may not add or remove anything to the prayer, we may not change it or try to overhaul or improve upon it. Were we capable of fully comprehending the essence and “why” of prayer, perhaps we would be able to compose our own prayers. However, since prayer has remained an unsolved puzzle to us, we may not allow ourselves the liturgical or literary license to create new prayers. We must be very careful and resolute to maintain the sanctioned and accepted traditional text.

The Talmud (מגלה יז: ב) relates the following regarding the members of the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah, the body of elders who formulated the text of our prayers:

אמר רבי יוחנן ואמרי לה במתניתא תנא מאה ועשרים זקנים ובהם כמה נביאים תיקנו שמונה עשרה ברכות על הסדר

120 elders among them some number of prophets who formulated the 18 blessings according to the order. Prophets were required, for without their involvement and assistance, even the members of the Great Assembly themselves would not have granted themselves permission to institute the fixed text of prayer that man uses in his dialogue with the Creator of the world. It is worthwhile to note that at the time Chazal added the 19th blessing, למלשינים ו, in Yavneh, Rabbi Gamliel, the leader of the Sanhedrin, did not want to author the prayer himself. Instead, he tapped Shmuel Hakatan, about whom the Brysa relates that he was worthy to be a prophet, to formulate the blessing (ברכות כח: ב).

It is also interesting to note that the largest portion of our prayers were assembled from words, and often from entire passages, of Tanach. Chachmei Yisrael tried as much as possible to avoid composing their own words and prayers, for when one deals with something that he does not understand, he must be very careful and very cautious in his approach. Had Moses not referred to God as הקל הגדול הגבור והנורא, we would not have had the right to address God with those terms in our Shmoneh Esray.

An extension of this point of view may be seen in the Halachic statement regarding changing the text and format of blessings:

כל המשנה ממטבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות אינו אלא טועה

One who changes anything in the form and format of blessings is incorrect and acts mistakenly. [Note: the text quoted in the article refers to Brachot 40b, however the text there says לא יצא ידי חובתו. The text in the article is closer to Maimonides Hilchot Brachot 1:5 and Hilchot Kriat Shma 1:7. See Kesef Mishna in Hilchot Brachot for an explanation why the Rambam changed the text. His answer fits well with the Rav's thesis.] Certain changes to text and format disqualify the prayer, and one who alters the prayer is obligated to repeat it. The Halacha extends even further, that one must pray three-times a day and no more. (While there is a concept of an additional prayer, Tefilas N'davah, there are many laws associated with its recitation and Jews practiced it very infrequently.)

Before one stands up to recite Shmoneh Esray, he reads Krias Shma twice a day with its associated blessings. In the morning we precede the Blessings of Shma with phrases and chapters of Psalms. Even before the start of the Mincha service, we begin with תהלה לדוד and אשרי, chapters from Psalms, before we recite the Shmoneh Esray. For man may not immediately leap into the Shmoneh Esray and attempt to approach God without an appropriate preamble. The introduction to prayer is the recitation of Psalms. In this holy book filled with prayers of admission, supplication, heartfelt feeling, song and praise, every soul who yearns for, loves and dreams of God can find the heavenly voice that expresses his thoughts, feelings and desires. By immersing oneself in this wonderful book, man affirms and strengthens his decision, trust and resolve to meet with the Eternal One and to converse with Him.

The praying individual always complained and cried to God. He opened up and revealed his problems to Him, he spent time with Him and cried and consoled himself with Hashem. He sang songs of praise and thanks to Him. The individual who prays feels so close to God, and this thought gives him the strength to approach and bang on the gates of heaven. Still, in the final analysis, the individual who prays the Shmoneh Esray begins with the verse השם שפתי תפתח, God please open my lips so my mouth may recite Your praises. For he alone does not have the strength nor the arrogance to do it without help from the Almighty. Despite all his introductions, he cannot

eliminate the feelings of worthlessness and deficiency to allow him to approach the Creator of the world. At the conclusion of the Shmoneh Esray, the same person who just prayed falls down and recites תחנון, supplications, in which he expresses again his worthlessness and pleads for mercy and forgiveness, even for the arrogance of offering his just concluded prayer itself.

The Halakha did not approve of special collections of prayers or the introduction of individual or a different order of prayer. All man's requests must be inserted in, and fit appropriately in, the rubric of the Shmoneh Esray, either in the middle blessings, the blessing of Shomeah Tefilah or immediately after the conclusion of the Shmoneh Esray (ברכות לא: א). Only then can the individual request from God for his own needs and to fall down before Him and pray as much as his heart desires. Only then can his own words meld with the ancient, traditional Shmoneh Esray.

In times of need for the community or for the individual, Jews would assemble in the synagogues and storm the heavenly throne. However, their thunderous request would express itself through the recitation of Psalms and not through the formulation of new prayers. The only additional collection of prayers the Halacha sanctioned is the Slichot we recite in the 10 days of repentance and before Rosh Hashanah. (The Slichot that we recite on a fast day are recited immediately after Shmoneh Esray, just like Tachanun is recited daily and has the same intent. They are different than the Slichot that we recite in the 10 days of repentance.) However, to institute this exception of Slichot around the High Holy Days, the Chachmei HaMesorah relied on the special dispensation that is contained in the verse וירד השם בענן ויתיצב עמו שם ויקרא בשם השם (שמות לד:ה). Still the organizers of Slichot maintained the format of the other prayers, as Slichot consists of a collection of verses from Tanach, including the 13 attributes of Mercy and admissions, ויידוים, very short prayers such as אבינו מלכנו, עננו, מי שענה, that are very old and date back to Talmudic times.

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