

Pray and Mean It will be an occasional listserv – every 1 to 2 weeks. If you wish to be on the list, please let me know by sending me an e-mail to CantorJC@aol.com asking to be placed on the listserv Pray and Mean It. You are welcome to share this with others who might find it interesting or valuable. Recipients will NOT be able to respond to the entire list, but may correspond with me

Thanks and best wishes – Cantor Jack Chomsky, Congregation Tifereth Israel, Columbus Ohio 10/31/06

Pray and Mean It

At the outset, that is what I have chosen to call this exercise – Pray and Mean It.

Many of us grew up learning to say or sing the words of prayers without a clue as to what they meant. Some grew up without even knowing how to say the words at all. Either scenario has been cause for too many people to turn their back on the practice of prayer – under the erroneous assumption that it is not a meaningful activity.

I do staunchly maintain that meaning might flow from practice – in other words, it may be beneficial to engage in the activity even before it has meaning. But the enterprise I undertake at this time intends to attach practice and meaning from the very beginning.

The focus of our musings will be the daily shacharit service – that is, the service recited on weekday mornings (as contrasted with Shabbat). Once upon a time, I thought that it was too long – had too many pieces to it. But as I have grown more and more experienced with its content and structure, I think I would struggle to figure out what needs to be cut.

Nonetheless, this venture begins from the other direction. With each of these postings, I will suggest a prayer text and behavior as a starting point – imagining that the only thing that the reader is doing comes from the texts contained herein and in this order. In other words, Dayenu! It Would Be Enough if you only said and did what is in these pages. But of course, I would encourage you to add layer upon layer to your personal practice.

Others might choose an order very different from mine. Perhaps you'll re-write this book in your own way, your own order. May your enterprise and mine be blessed!

Step #1

I choose to begin with the Birchot Hashachar – the “morning blessings.” You’ll find the text in question in Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays on page 6. In the original Siddur Sim Shalom on page 10.

Birkot Hashachar begins with a litany of 14 or so blessings. In this first “lesson,” I’ll refer just to the first of those:

**ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם
אשר נתן לשכוי בינה
להבחין בין יום ובין לילה**

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haolam, asher natan lasechvi vinah l'havchin bein yom uvein lailah. In Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays, this is translated as “Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, enabling us to distinguish day from night.” Very nice. Very polite. But what it REALLY says in the Hebrew is Praised are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who gave to the rooster the wisdom to distinguish between day and

night.

What's the difference? Well, for one thing, is the prayer about me? Or is it about a rooster? I think that the prayer is about waking up in the morning. I don't know about you, but I don't wake up in the morning by accident. I wake either because my clock radio alarm turns on (the [a]moral modern equivalent of the rooster) or because I *know* it's going to turn on soon.

The most important thing about this b'rachah is that we wake up by reciting a blessing – rather than saying “\$#@!%*#!” This is a beautifully affirmative act – one which might feel out of reach for some people. I know that I've been blessed by being naturally a morning person – and I don't face the struggles that some others do!

As noted above, this b'rachah is the first of 14 or so, most of which have to do with “coming on-line” – recognizing the basic functions of our bodies and minds. I'll get back to those others later in these writings. But the key is to begin our day recognizing a) that we are fortunate to be alive, b) that we are fortunate to have a means to determine when it's time to get up. We could be thankful that God gave the rooster the natural knowledge to announce the start of the day. We're *probably* thankful that we don't need to hear the rooster any more! We could be thankful that our alarm clock works, for the electricity that powers it, for the workers who manufactured it, the people who sold it to us, etc. We could be thankful that it starts with a news or entertainment choice we prefer – like NPR (in my case).

Mastering this b'rachah means that we would wake each day being thankful – rather than resentful of the fact that our sleep and rest have ended.

Dayenu! If this were the only act of prayer that you would perform each and every day, one could maintain that you have a significant connection to God, thankfulness and prayer.

So try to begin each day with a blessing and not a curse. Make it a conscious act. Be proud of yourself for doing it. Say it in your own words. Or in English. Or in Hebrew. If you can make this simple (well, maybe not so simple) b'rachah have meaning for you when you say its words in Hebrew, I think you'll really be on to something. . .

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אשר נתן לשכוי בינה
להבחין בין יום ובין לילה

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haolam, asher natan lasechvi v'vinah
l'havchin bein yom uvein lailah*

Praised are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who gave to the rooster the wisdom to distinguish between day and night.

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