

Pray and Mean It is an occasional listserv – every 1 to 2 weeks. Its aim is to build an understanding of and connection to Jewish prayer step by step. It is administered through googlegroups. (Your inclusion in this group is confidential. I am the only person who has access to the names and e-mail addresses on the list.) People who wish to be added to the listserv may visit the googlegroups site or e-mail me at CantorJC@aol.com. All postings can be viewed with clear legible Hebrew at my synagogue's website, www.tiferethisrael.org 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

Pray and Mean It 10

This is the 10th installment in this series.

We now turn our attention to the *middle* of the Amidah. This is the first passage that differs on weekdays from the liturgy of Shabbat. (It is better to look at the Shabbat liturgy as that which varies from the everyday -- *why is this day different from all other days?*)

The real core of daily prayer is found in the 13 b'rachot that begin with **אתה חונן**. It is in the *middle* of the Amidah that we give voice to our daily concerns -- to the things that worry us, the things we need to work on, the things we need God to help us with. This has always been my greatest concern about people who daven or come to synagogue only on Shabbat: that they don't get the payoff of this intimate conversation.

On Shabbat, these 13 b'rachot are replaced with *kedushat hayom* -- sanctification of the day -- celebration of Shabbat. And because it's unseemly to approach God on God's day off (and our day off) with business and worldly concerns, a person who goes to schul on Shabbat with a heavy heart finds a Siddur filled with prayers saying that God is great, wonderful, exalted, incomparable, etc. -- but not much opportunity to say "God, I need help with. . . ."

It's a different matter during the week:

Atah chonen l'adam da-at,

um'lameid le-enosh binah.

Choneinu mei-itcha deiah binah v'haskeil.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Chonein hada-at.

אַתָּה חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דָּעֵת,

וּמְלִמֵּד לְאֶנוֹשׁ בִּינָה.

חֲנִינוּ מֵאִתְּךָ דְּעָה, בִּינָה וְהַשְׂכִּיל.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', חוֹנֵן הַדָּעֵת.

You favor humanity with knowledge,
and teach mortals understanding.

Favor us from You with knowledge, understanding and discernment.

Praised are You, Adonai gracious Giver of knowledge.

This *b'rachah* strikes at the heart of what I'm trying to accomplish with this project: it's one of those moments that has the potential to be sufficient to affect our whole day positively. Asking for knowledge, understanding and discernment -- and doing so as the first of the 13 daily *b'rachot* -- strikes me as a uniquely Jewish act, as well as an importantly Jewish act.

Why do I say this? Why have Jews flourished in any and every society that has given them the opportunity to do so? Because learning is at the heart of Jewish culture, and has been at the heart of that culture at least as long as we've been a praying people (dating back essentially to the destruction of the 2nd Temple).

For this first *b'rachah*, we could have asked for strength, for power, for wealth, for messianic redemption, for victory over our foes. But what we ask for is knowledge, understanding and discernment, showing our understanding(!) of the power of the mind.

It is further amazing and inspiring that we don't just ask to be smart, but we ask for different aspects of learning and understanding. 6 days out of 7, then, we begin our petitionary prayers by concentrating on how we will be using our brains.

Deiah (knowledge) can be understood to mean raw information -- command of the facts. It is the lowest level of knowledge and understanding, but is critical to reaching the higher levels. We can interpret *binah* to mean understanding -- to be able to organize our knowledge in useful ways. But there is a higher level yet -- *haskel* takes us toward wisdom. Of course this is the same root as the Yiddish word *seichel* -- *common sense*. But what we seek here is something even deeper than common sense -- a cosmic sense, as it were, of balancing our facts and our understanding. What a great way to prepare for our day -- to seek knowledge, and to simultaneously remember that we need to organize that knowledge and then choose the ways to use it -- when to speak up, when to remain silent. A great challenge perhaps, but one that we are acknowledging in a deep yet brief way in this *b'rachah*.

Beginning our petitionary prayers with this paragraph also helps to remind us to keep our minds focused for the next few minutes as we recite these prayers. I know that I often have difficulty "running the mental gauntlet" of the 13 petitionary paragraphs of the Amidah, and sometimes find myself somewhere deep in the Amidah not having remembered saying some of the previous paragraphs. Starting the prayer exercise with *atah chonen* is a good way to remind us "before we enter" that we need to keep concentrating. And of course if it's difficult to keep our brains focused just during the recitation of the Amidah, how much greater is the challenge for the entire day?!

May God indeed grant us knowledge, understanding and wisdom!

If you wish to respond, you may e-mail me at CantorJC@aol.com.