

*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](mailto:CantorJC@aol.com). All postings can be viewed with clear legible Hebrew at my synagogue's website, [www.tiferethisrael.org](http://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 11**

This is the 11th installment in this series.

This initiative sometimes feels like I'm trying to convince you that *every* paragraph in the Amidah is my favorite -- or should be yours, although some of the installments have indeed pointed at ways in which some of the texts of our daily prayers can be troubling.

I'll be honest about the next paragraph (השיבנו אבינו לתורתך): It's *not* one of my favorites. Yet one of the best parts of this Pray and Mean It series for *me* is that sometimes, in the act of trying to make sense or meaning for *you*, I come to a new understanding of the text for me!

<i>Hashivenu avinu l'toratecha</i>	הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ אֲבִינוּ לְתוֹרַתְךָ,
<i>v'karveinu malkeinu la-avodatecha</i>	וְקַרְבֵנוּ מִלְכֵנוּ לְעַבֹדְתְךָ,
<i>v'hachazirenu bit'shuvah sh'leimah l'fanecha.</i>	וְהַחְזִירֵנוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ.
<i>Baruch Atah Adonai, harotzeh bit'shuvah.</i>	בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', הַרוֹצֵה בְּתַשׁוּבָה.

Cause us to return, our Father, to your Torah,  
and bring us near, our King, to your service,  
and bring us back in perfect repentance before You.  
Praised are You, Adonai, who likes repentance.

The challenge of this paragraph for me has been that I find it quite similar to the one that follows it: **סלח לנו אבינו**. And I generally prefer the second one. Both paragraphs give us a few seconds of *high holiday*-ness in the middle of our daily prayers: **השיבנו**, after all, is at the root (literally) of **תשובה** (t'shuvah) -- repentance. Just as we seek to repent during the time approaching and between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we do a little of this each day (except Shabbat). Yet the exercise of beating our chest that we incorporate in **סלח לנו** seems to be more effective, more direct, and more possible in the brief moment it takes us to recite the prayer. And despite the explanations of various sages and modern commentators about the “perfect” order of these paragraphs (**אתה חונן/השיבנו/סלח לנו**) -- “knowledge leads to repentance leads to forgiveness” -- it still strikes me as somewhat out of order. I feel more ready for my turning (t'shuvah) *after* acknowledging my sinning. But that's not the order that was chosen for us when the prayers were codified centuries ago, so I've got to live with it -- every day.

One thing that I understand deeply from these two paragraphs is that turning and repentance are *year-long activities*. When I was growing up, I thought that confession of sin and recognition of the need to repent were high holiday activities. It was not until I was in cantorial school and became exposed to daily prayer that I realized that these mental and emotional actions are year-round. In fact, we do them every day of the year -- except, of course, Shabbat. As previously noted, for many Jews the only exposure to tefillah is (worst case scenario) the high holidays or (medium case scenario) high holidays and Shabbat.

Exposure to these two paragraphs on a daily basis (except Shabbat) really transforms our high holiday experiences: instead of repentance and returning being once-a-year activities, they are completely ordinary activities greatly elevated during the Yamim Noraim.

Okay. So I like the next b'rachah better. What about *this one*?!

It does have some very nice qualities, upon further inspection.

*Hashivenu avinu l'toratecha*

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ אֲבֵינוּ לְתוֹרַתְךָ,

Cause us to return, our Father, to your Torah -- This gives us an opportunity to remind ourselves (thrice) daily that our hearts and minds could be better directed toward Torah -- and our request is of someone very close to us -- our Father. The next phrase also emphasizes closeness:

*v'karveinu malkeinu la-avodatecha*

וְקַרְבֵנוּ מִלְכֵנוּ לְעִבּוֹדְתְךָ,

“Bring us near, our King, to your service” recognizes the closeness of God. The word *karov* means close or near -- even though the title *melech* (king) would seem to be far. And we *can* draw near to the monarch through worship, work, or service -- all legitimate meanings of the word *avodah*.

*v'hachazirenu bit'shuvah sh'leimah l'fanecha.*

וְהַחְזִירֵנוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ.

The use of the word **החזיר** is quite an interesting choice. You may (or may not) recall the phrase **הַמְחִיר שְׂכִינְתוֹ לְצִיּוֹן** in the *R'tzei* paragraph (Pray and Mean It #7). In the *R'tzei* prayer, we are asking God to accept our offering and to cause the Shechinah to *return* to Zion. In *this* phrase, we are asking God to return *us* to God's presence in full repentance. Although we discussed *R'tzei* first, it is this prayer (the **השיבנו**) which actually comes first. Indeed, if we are able to repent, isn't it much more likely that God will be able to return the shechinah to Zion when we ask for that later?!

*Baruch Atah Adonai, harotzeh bit'shuvah.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', הַרוֹצֵה בְּתַשׁוּבָה.

Finally, the b'rachah concludes with a remarkable statement: Praised are You, Adonai, who *likes* (desires) repentance. Indeed, perhaps it is this sense that God enjoys when we repent that enables us to proceed to the next paragraph (to be discussed in the next Pray and Mean It) where we actually confess our sins.

Maybe the main difference is that **סלח לנו אבינו** comes with choreography: we beat our chests as we confess our sins (we'll talk about that more next time). Who knows? Maybe I should add

some choreography to **השיבנו אבינו לתורתך**! Maybe some fancy footwork?! *Turn us toward your Torah?! Maybe a little pirouette?! Okay -- it would be out of place. BUT -- that kind of turning CAN take place in our hearts and minds. And THAT'S the point of this paragraph of the Amidah, isn't it?*

May we all turn toward God, toward Torah and toward each other -- every day.

If you wish to respond, you may e-mail me at [CantorJC@aol.com](mailto:CantorJC@aol.com).