

*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 12**

This is the 12th installment in this series.

Remembering where we are and why we're here for a moment: my goal is to perform the Hillel-like exercise of explaining moments of prayer "on one foot" -- with the idea being that if we were just to do this ONE THING, it might be enough! (At least for a start.) And we find ourselves, after having met some very basic building blocks of the entire daily service, in the midst of a 19-installment segment covering the 19 blessings of our services' central prayer, the Amidah. (This is the 8th of those 19 segments.)

Indeed, this one very brief b'rachah relating to forgiveness is one of those moments that we might construe as sufficient -- as the basis of a prayerful life; and all the rest is commentary.

*S'lach lanu avinu ki chatanu*

*M'chal lanu malkeinu ki fashanu*

*Ki mochel v'soleiach Atah*

*Baruch Atah Adonai*

*Chanun hamarbeh lisloach.*

סִלַּח לָנוּ אֲבִינוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ,  
מְחַל לָנוּ מַלְכֵנוּ כִּי פָשַׁעְנוּ,  
כִּי מוֹחֵל וְסוֹלֵחַ אַתָּה.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'  
חֲנוּן הַמְרַבֵּה לְסִלַּח.

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned;  
Pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed;  
for forgiver and pardoner are you.  
Praised are You, Adonai,  
gracious, who greatly forgives.

As I noted in posting #11, this passage is a clear partner with the one that precedes it. The preceding b'rachah was for turning/repentance. Both of these passages conjure up an aspect of high holiday observance. The words **סלח לנו אבינו** (*slach lanu avinu*) are at the core of the Yom Kippur liturgy -- and as I noted previously, their presence in the *daily* ritual counteracts the mistaken belief of many that repentance is exclusively a high holiday activity. Quite the contrary! Every day except Shabbat, our tradition has us acknowledge our sins and rap ourselves over our hearts.

When I first came to understand this (cantorial school, as I wasn't previously exposed to daily liturgy), I found that it turned my liturgical/spiritual world upside down. I had previously assumed that confession of sin was a Catholic/Christian behavior. But as is often the case, it turns out that a behavior we may have thought was non-Jewish was actually something that the Christians took from their Jewish roots (e.g.

baptism [see Mikveh]). And this idea of *confessing sin* is an *extremely* Jewish behavior. Of course, we do it in a Jewish way, too: the Catholic confesses to the priest. The Jew needs no intermediary.

*S'lach lanu avinu ki chatanu*

סִלַח לָנוּ אָבִינוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ,

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned;

An interesting beginning. We first ask forgiveness from our *Father*. In one sense, this emphasizes our closeness to God, thinking of “Him” as our Father. This creates some tension for many of us: Is God our Father or our Mother? Or both? And how do we put that into words. *Forgive us, our Parent* doesn't seem to be an improvement. *Forgive us, our Mother* would be an improvement for some, an aggravation for some, a confusion for others. I would encourage us to find the closeness in the text in whatever context works for us. Speaking of us. . . the text says *Forgive us* -- not forgive *me*. Clearly, at this moment in the service, we are praying in a very personal and individual way -- but we use the plural form, recognizing that we are still part of a people even at the moment that we consider our individual transgressions.

*M'chal lanu malkeinu ki fashanu*

מַחֵל לָנוּ מַלְכֵנוּ כִּי פָשַׁעְנוּ,

Pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed;

This second line is completely parallel to the first. But where the first seemed deeply personal -- *Forgive us our father* -- this one recognizes the great gap between us: *Pardon us our King*. Again, we can have intellectual and emotional issues as to whether it should/could be King or Queen and/or whether either of those characterizations is far too huMan for the Creator. But we will do better to find what *is* useful in the language -- the sense that we are praying to a being who is far and mighty (in this sentence -- but very, very near in the previous one).

*Ki mochel v'soleiach Atah*

כִּי מוֹחֵל וְסוֹלֵחַ אַתָּה.

for forgiver and pardoner are you.

Why ask for pardon and forgiveness if there is no hope of receiving them? We tend to focus on the act of confessing more than on the forgiveness. After all, we strike ourselves on the words *סלח לנו* (*slach lanu* -- forgive us) and *מחל לנו* (*m'chal lanu* -- pardon us). And we don't have a hand motion for *כי מוחל וסולח אתה* (*ki mochel v'soleiach atah* -- for forgiver and pardoner are you).

And this phrase gives us the opportunity to leverage this whole forgiveness issue into a huge positive: if God forgives and pardons *us*, what should *we* do? About God? About those who have sinned against us? (Or offended us, for who are we to say what is a sin?)

In *Sotah 14a*, Rabbi Chama said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: “Follow Adonai your God” (Deuteronomy 13:5): What does this mean? Is it possible for a mortal to follow God's presence? The verse means to teach us that we should follow the attributes of the Holy One.

*Baruch Atah Adonai*

*Chanun hamarbeh lisloach.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'  
חֲנוּן הַמְרַבֵּה לְסִלְתָּ.

Praised are You, Adonai,  
gracious (one), who greatly forgives.

So it turns out that, although we are asking for forgiveness, we understand on a deeper level we must learn (if we do indeed strive to emulate God, the great Forgiver) to forgive others. Which means there's a LOT going on when we say these few words in our daily prayers!

If we can ask forgiveness for a few moments in Shacharit and Minchah and Musaph -- and if we can *grant* forgiveness for a few moments in Shacharit and Minchah and Musaph -- how much better will our lives be each and every day? And the lives of those we forgive?

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