

Pray and Mean It 3

This is the 3rd installment in this series.

We began our project by reciting one of the b'rachot of Birkot Hashachar, the introductory blessings of the daily service – then added the 1st paragraph of the Sh'ma.

Surely the next touchstone would be the Amidah – and we will begin at its beginning – the first paragraph.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,
אֱ-לֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם, אֱ-לֹהֵי יִצְחָק, וְאֱ-לֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב,
אֱ-לֹהֵי שָׂרָה, אֱ-לֹהֵי רִבְקָה, אֱ-לֹהֵי רָחֵל, וְאֱ-לֹהֵי לֵאָה.
הָא-ל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא, א-ל עֲלִיוֹן, גּוֹמֵל חַסְדִּים טוֹבִים, וְקִנְיָה
הַכֹּל, וְזוֹכֵר חַסְדֵי אֲבוֹת, וּמַבִּיא גּוֹאֵל לְבְנֵי בְנֵיהֶם, לְמַעַן שְׂמוֹ בְּאַהֲבָה.
מְלֶכֶד עוֹזֵר וּפּוֹקֵד וּמוֹשִׁיעַ וּמַגֵּן.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', מְגֵן אַבְרָהָם וּפּוֹקֵד שָׂרָה.

*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Velohei Avoteinu
Elohei Avraham Elohei Yitzchak Velohei Yaakov
Elohei Sarah Elohei Rivkah Elohei Rachel Velohei Leah
Hael Hagadol Hagibor V'hanora El Elyon
Gomel Chasadim Tovim V'konei Hakol
V'zocheir Chasdei Avot
Umeivi Goel Livnei V'neihem
L'ma'an Sh'mo B'ahavah
Meloch Ozer Ufokeid Umoshia Umagen
Baruch Atah Adonai
Magen Avraham Ufokeid Sarah.*

Praised are You Adonai Our God and God of our ancestors,
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,
God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel and God of Leah.

God, Big, Heroic, Awesome, God on high, Who bestows lovingkindness and possesses all things; who remembers the piety of the ancient ones, and will bring a redeemer to their children's children for the sake of the Name in love. O King, Protector, Helper, Savior and Shield. Blessed are You Adonai, Shield of Abraham and Protector of Sarah.

This paragraph is the opening of every Amidah – every day. The Amidah is recited three times on most days – 4 times on Shabbat and Festivals and 5 times on Yom Kippur. Each Amidah begins and ends the same way. The middle of the Amidah (which we will consider little by little in later postings) changes according to the circumstances of the day.

We begin this amazing conversation by reminding God and ourselves that we aren't strangers. It is, after all, pretty audacious to step up and address the Creator of the Universe one to One!

Invoking our ancestors serves a number of purposes. On one level, it reminds God and us that we are from a distinguished lineage – and that we should be listened to based on *their* merits. Yet I find this passage important on a personal basis as well. When I invoke the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- and Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, I think about my own relatives -- those whose names are known to me, like my grandfather Isidore and grandmother Ella, and my other grandfather Jacob (for whom I am named) and grandmother Bertha -- and other distinguished relatives I recall from my childhood -- and others whose names might not be so easily known to me -- my grandparents' grandparents, and so on. When we invoke the names of our *famous* ancestors, we can effectively invoke the memories and deeds (and challenges) of our *not-so-famous* ancestors. It is in this way that this opening paragraph can have the broadest array of meanings.

Another aspect of this prayer that is exemplary and important is the litany of different names or descriptions of God --

1) *Hael* 2) *Hagadol* 3) *Hagibor* 4) *Hanora* 5) *El Elyon* 6) *Gomel Chasadim Tovim* 7) *Konei Hakol* 8) *Zocheir Chasdei Avot* 9) *Meivi Goel Livnei V'neihem* 10) *Melech* 11) *Ozer* 12) *Fokeid* 13) *Moshia* 14) *Magen*

1) The God 2) The Great 3) The Mighty 4) The Awesome 5) God Most High 6) Provider of Good Favor 7) Possessor of all 8) Rememberer of the Righteousness of our ancestors 9) One who will bring a redeemer to their children's children 10) King 11) Helper 12) Guardian 13) Savior 14) Defender

On the one hand, this sort of expression is understandably out of style. Yet we can certainly learn from and benefit from it. I know that in my life I need to do a better job of praising others -- of finding words expressing gratitude and appreciation to those around me, whether in the workplace or at home. So this (thrice daily) recitation of passages like the opening paragraph of the Amidah helps me to practice -- to get some experience with finding more than one way to say something complimentary.

As I say these words, I take pleasure in recalling the special relationship of my famous and not-so-famous ancestors with the very God I'm addressing today. I feel that I can draw on their faith -- to come to a deeper connection to my own faith.

One more important point. I have chosen to include the *imahot* -- the mothers of our tradition -- as well as the liturgical language associated with it in siddurim recently published by the Conservative movement. This is one acceptable practice within the movement. It is also considered acceptable *not* to include the mothers. Personally, I have grown to prefer including them in our personal prayers. I have established an informal practice in my congregation that on Shabbat the mothers' names will be included in Shacharit or in Musaph -- but not generally in both. This helps to validate and respect both points of view.

My experience is that people tend to object to each other's practices, and I think it's unfortunate, and out of character with Jewish tradition. People who want to include the mothers too often think of those who prefer not to include them as misogynistic and prejudiced. Those who prefer not to include the mothers think of the *imahot* crowd as trendy and disrespectful to tradition. My preference is to have respect in either direction. I personally find it meaningful to include the mothers of our tradition. It doubles the way that I can relate to the paragraph. It respects the women in my life -- my grandparents, my aunts, my mother, my cousins, my wife, my sister, my daughter, my friends. . . Yet I also understand that for some people, it is jarring to change the words that are so familiar from our tradition. And the movement of which I'm a part says that either approach is acceptable -- so why should I attack either camp?

We are entitled to our own strong feelings. But we also need to have some more patience with people who have different feelings.

As it turns out, the long-awaited decision of the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards regarding the status of homosexuals in the movement has come out just days before I release this posting. The necessity of respecting those with different views is crucial to dealing with the implications of this decision -- and each other.

(I was feeling ready to send this. . . but had some additional thoughts about the gender-inclusive language. I was reflecting on the choice of the verb to associate with the mothers (Sarah, specifically) -- *fokeid Sarah*. This has generally been rendered "protector" or "guardian" of Sarah. Yet the dictionaries that I consulted generally referred to words related to *fokeid* as commander. Hmmm. . . Digging a little deeper, I was reminded of where this text comes from, which is the reason that it was chosen for our tefillah: in B'reishit 21.1 (Parshat Vayera) it says *Vadonai Pakad et Sarah kaasher amar* וְה' פָּקַד אֶת שָׂרָה כְּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר -- usually rendered as And God *remembered* Sarah as He had promised (referring to her promised yet extremely surprising pregnancy). This, of course, is neither *guarded*, *commanded* or *protected* -- so the matter becomes even more complicated. Yet our use of this in the first paragraph of the Amidah turns out, in my opinion, to be incredibly moving: to say *Magen Avraham Ufokeid Sarah* is to acknowledge God as the Defender of Avraham (this is also based on language from the book of *B'reishit*) and as the One who delivered to Sarah the most amazing thing that she had been hoping for over the course of her entire adult life -- something that seemed hopeless and out of the question. So when we include the *imahot* in our prayer, we are acknowledging God as Defender, Protector, Guardian, Commander, Remember -- and Deliverer of the most difficult promises we can imagine. Seems like a worthy and inspiring addition. Just one man's opinion. . .)

May each of us be worthy, whatever choices of language we make, to approach *Hael Hagadol Hagibor V'Hanora* -- the Great, Mighty and Awesome God, daily and personally!

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