

*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.) If you are not already on the list, you can sign up at <http://groups.google.com/group/prayandmeanit/topics?lnk=gschg> or you may e-mail me at [CantorJC@aol.com](mailto:CantorJC@aol.com) and I'll be happy to add you to the list. 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 5**

This is the 5th installment in this series.

To this point, we have touched on 4 different parts of the service -- an introductory b'rachah, a paragraph of the Sh'ma, a paragraph of the Amidah, and the Aleinu, one of the service's concluding prayers.

We will now turn our attention back to the Amidah -- and this will occupy us for quite some time: The weekday Amidah is comprised of 19 blessings -- so, it is quite likely that the next 18 postings will have to do with the Amidah. One could make an argument that the Amidah is where I should have begun anyway -- as it is the central prayer of every service in the Jewish tradition. If one did nothing but recite its 19 benedictions with kavanah (direction, focus), one would merely be inspired and totally connected to the world, oneself, the creator and the Jewish people (and much more, as will be seen)!

Yet in the context of the morning service, one arrives at the Amidah only after a procession of various forms of preparation -- which will be the focus of later postings. These other elements of our daily morning ritual are most worthwhile -- but one must also note that one of our three daily services -- the minchah, or afternoon, service -- is almost only the Amidah -- by which I mean that the minchah service, when recited individually, is constituted of only the psalm Ashrei (primarily Psalm 145), the Amidah and the Aleinu. So there certainly is some daily precedent for focusing exclusively on the Amidah.

In our previous postings, we examined the 1st paragraph of the Amidah (see <http://www.tiferethisrael.org/Resources/PrayAndMeanIt/PandM3.pdf> ). One should bear in mind about the Amidah that its central portion varies a great deal -- but that its beginning and ending do not. It is framed by three blessings at the beginning and three blessings at the end. On a regular weekday, we have an additional 13 blessings in the middle. On holy days like Shabbat and Festivals, these 13 blessings are replaced by one blessing (*kedushat hayom* -- sanctification of the day).

We'll talk more about that later -- but I'd like to spend the next several postings sketching out the frame -- the opening and closing blessings.

As mentioned, the first blessing -- known as Avot (Fathers or Ancestors) -- was discussed at some length in Posting #3. The second blessing -- G'vurot -- is often referred to as one that acknowledges God's power in nature. But if you read it through, you'll see one theme appearing over and over and over -- the theme of resurrection.

אַתָּה גְבוּר לְעוֹלָם אֶ-דָּנִי, מְחַיֶּה מֵתִים אַתָּה, רַב לְהוֹשִׁיעַ. (בְּחוֹרֵף:  
מְשִׁיב הַרְוֵחַ וּמוֹרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם.) מְכַלְכֵּל חַיִּים בְּחֶסֶד, מְחַיֶּה מֵתִים  
בְּרַחֲמִים רַבִּים, סוֹמֵךְ נוֹפְלִים, וְרוֹפֵא חוֹלִים, וּמַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים, וּמְקִיִּים  
אָמוּנָתוֹ לַיֹּשְׁנֵי עֶפְרָי, מִי כְמוֹךָ בְּעַל גְּבוּרוֹת וּמִי דוֹמָה לָךְ, מְלַךְ מִמִּית  
וּמְחַיֶּה וּמְצַמִּיחַ יְשׁוּעָה. וְנֶאֱמַן אַתָּה לְהַחְיֹת מֵתִים. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה',  
מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים.

*Atah gibor l'olam Adonai, m'chayei meitim atah, rav l'hoshia.*  
*(In winter: Mashiv haruach umorid hagashem)*  
*M'chalkel chayim b'chesed, m'chayeh meitim b'rachamim rabim*  
*Somech noflim f'rofei cholim umatir asurim*  
*Um'kayeim emunato lisheinei afar*  
*Mi chamocha ba-al g'vurot umi domeh lach*  
*Melech meimit um'chayeh umatzmiach y'shuah*  
*V'ne-eman atah l'hachayot meitim.*  
*Baruch atah Adonai, m'chayei hametim.*

You are mighty forever Adonai, you revive the dead, you are mighty to save.

*(In winter: You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall.)*

You sustain the living with lovingkindness, revive the dead with great mercy,

support the falling, heal the sick, free the bound,

and keep your faith with them who sleep in the dust.

Who is like You, Adonai of mighty acts, and who resembles You?

Ruler over death and life and Causer of salvation?

Faithful are You to revive the dead.

Praised are You, Adonai, who revives the dead.

We Jews don't like to talk much about resurrection these days -- for the last 2000 years or so in some cases, less in others. This is in part because we have struggled with what the "capital r" form of resurrection means and has meant in the Christian world -- and what that has meant to the Jewish world.

Yet this is an authentic Jewish idea -- and one that can have great power to us. Most liberal Jews today don't believe in a corporeal resurrection -- that a day will come that the dead will come back to life -- and we therefore seem somewhat embarrassed by the insistent imagery of the paragraph.

Yet I believe that there are a number of things about this text that can give it immediate meaning and power for us. First of all, consider that repeating phrase *m'chayei hametim* -- usually rendered as "who revives the dead." Bear in mind that the word *m'chayei* is from the same root as the word *chayim*. I prefer to think of *m'chayei hametim* as "who gives life to the dead."

When I consider it in this light, I find a tremendous connection to life as I experience it and

understand it -- and a tremendous connection to one of the true wonders of the world in which we live: God has given life to the dead literally through the miraculous way in which we pass life from one generation to the next. Each of us is made of the stuff of our parents, who were of course made of the stuff of their parents (and on and on -- back to Adam and Eve, if you will). Do you think that DNA and the human reproductive system are worth a daily blessing? I sure do!

There is another level on which we give life to the dead -- and that is through remembering them, and trying to follow the example of that for which they stood. The capacity of generational and transgenerational memory is certainly another great miracle among the gifts that God has bestowed upon us.

I find these miracles to be really deep and profound -- and I think it's unfortunate that because of our reticence to talk about resurrection, we've missed the opportunity to connect to the reality of the way in which God literally, figuratively, intellectually and emotionally allows the dead to live on!

In the first b'rachah, we reminded God that we are the modern-day representatives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah -- so that God might listen to us. In the second b'rachah, we establish this connection more deeply -- perhaps so that we open ourselves up more deeply to God.

Of course, there's plenty more to this b'rachah as well --

You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall  
You sustain the living with lovingkindness. . .  
support the falling, heal the sick, free the bound. . .

We express our appreciation for this amazing planet and its cycles of nature (although I wouldn't overemphasize that theme at this point, as it will come up again later in the b'rachot in the middle of the Amidah), and we state unequivocally that God helps those who need help -- provides that which we need. We believe deeply that the world should be a righteous place -- that this is God's will. And that's why we have always worked so hard to imitate God in supporting the falling, healing the sick, and freeing the bound.

As I look back on my experience of daily prayer, I think that my reinterpretation of the phrase *m'chayei hametim* may have been one of the crucial turning points in my feeling for the Amidah. It took a concept that made me nervous (resurrection) and transformed it into something with deep and satisfying meaning -- and in a way that I feel is consistent with the text. That is the crux of "Pray and Mean It" -- to find a way to say the prayers that does have meaning -- and that we can return to again and again and again.

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