

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. People who wish to be added to the listserv may do so on 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 7

This is the 7th installment in this series.

We continue our sequence of discussions about the blessings of the Amidah, noting that the Amidah always begins and ends with (essentially) the same blessings (3 at the beginning and 3 at the end). We're therefore focusing on these 6 blessings prior to examining the 13 blessings in the middle.

We have completed the opening 3 b'rachot, and now move on to the closing 3 b'rachot. The first of these (the 17th of the 19 weekday b'rachot and the 5th of the 7 b'rachot on Shabbat or Yom Tov) is *R'tzei* -- a prayer for the acceptance of our offering.

רָצֵה, ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ, בְּעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבִתְפִלָּתָם, וְהַשֵּׁב אֶת הָעֲבוֹדָה לְדָבִיר
בֵּיתֶךָ [וְאֲשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל] וּתְפִלָּתָם בְּאַהֲבָה תִקְבַּל בְּרָצוֹן, וּתְהִי לְרָצוֹן תָּמִיד
עֲבוֹדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ. וְתַחֲזִינָה עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוּבֶךָ לְצִיּוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', הַמַּחְזִיר שְׂכִינָתוֹ לְצִיּוֹן.

R'tzei Adonai Eloheinu b'amcha yisrael uvit'filatam, v'hasheiv et ha-avodah lidvir beitecha [v'ishei yisrael] ut'filatam b'ahavah t'kabel b'ratzon, ut'hi l'ratzon tamid avodat yisrael amecha. V'techezenah eineinu b'shuvcha l'tziyon b'rachamim. Baruch Atah Adonai, hamachazir sh'chinato l'tziyon.

Accept, Adonai our God, your people Israel and their prayer. And restore the worship to the inner sanctuary of Your house. [And the fires (offerings) of Israel] and their prayer in love and favor receive willingly. And may the worship of Your people Israel be ever acceptable to You. And turn our eyes again to see Your return in mercy to Zion. Blessed are You, Adonai, who restores the Shechinah to Zion.

This b'rachah is about a) remembering the sacrifices of ancient times -- the way we used to pray, b) asking for acceptance of our modern-day offerings, and c) asking God to help us to look toward Zion and d) asking God to renew the heavenly presence there.

a) remembering the sacrifices of ancient times

Although it has been difficult for me to imagine a return to the ancient form of worship (animal sacrifice), I am struck by the difficulty of offering something truly worthwhile in our prayers: In ancient days, the sacrificial practice required our ancestors to offer objects of unquestionable value. In fact, the exact "cash" value of the sacrifice must have been quite clear. What do WE

offer of similar value today? Of course, it was the animal who made the greatest sacrifice. Still, I find it challenging to try to make my prayer as real as a physical sacrifice.

b) asking for acceptance of our modern-day offerings

What does it mean when we ask to “restore the worship to the inner sanctuary of Your house?” At face value, it means *re-institute the animal sacrifice* and those who include the words *v'ishei yisrael* (and the fires/offerings of Israel) emphasize this. (My tradition doesn't include these words.) I am more comfortable attempting to restore the intensity of worship to the inner sanctuary that is me and my relationship to God -- to take this moment in the Amidah as we begin its final sections to put an exclamation point on everything I've said up to this point.

We can further reflect on what it might mean if God were to command us to re-institute the worship of the Temple. Would it be animal sacrifice? Or would it be something deeper -- something that doesn't require the death of an animal, but would somehow reach deeper into our own lives?

c) asking God to help us to look toward Zion

I was about 25 years old when I first visited Israel. From an early age, I knew that it was supposed to be important -- but I didn't really feel it and I didn't exactly know why. Mostly, I knew it was important to my grandparents. My parents hadn't been to Israel, but my grandparents regularly purchased Israel Bonds for their grandchildren -- and I can still remember when they visited Israel on the S.S. Shalom! (Hard to imagine today.) Even for those who have not yet been to Israel -- or perhaps especially for them -- a daily (or 3x daily) statement of desire to look toward Zion will probably help to encourage a visit to Israel *and* to deepen the experience when it comes.

Today, having been fortunate to visit Israel quite a few times (though not enough times), the (3x) daily recitation of these words helps deepen my bond to the land and people that I know so well -- and, again, to entice me to visit sooner rather than later.

d) asking God to renew the heavenly presence there

Again, we can reflect on what this means. To those who first organized our daily prayers, they clearly envisioned a return of the divine presence that would mandate the reinstatement of the sacrificial rituals. Yet there are so many ways in which we can perceive of renewing God's heavenly presence in Zion -- whether it has to do with the religious life of those living in and visiting Israel, or a presence which will protect its citizens and help to move toward a time of peace and security in which Jews and non-Jews can live in peace and prosperity and trust one another in ways we cannot yet imagine.

Worth praying for. Worth working for.

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