

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 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

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This is the 8th installment in this series.

As we turn our attention to the second-to-last b'rachah of the Amidah, we find a text that for me outshines almost anything else in the liturgy. You'll recall that, at the outset of this project, we imagined saying only one prayer and having it suffice for our daily spiritual diet. If any prayer rises to that quality among those recited daily, it might well be **Modim** -- the elegant yet simple Thanksgiving prayer. It is this sense of thankfulness that is at the heart of the Jewish spiritual essence.

I have arranged the Hebrew (and the English) so that the structure of the prayer is a little more transparent than might usually be the case. . .

מוֹדִים אֲנַחֲנוּ לָךְ,
שָׂאֲתָה הוּא, ה' אֶ-לֵהֵינוּ וְא-לֵהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד,
צוּר חַיֵּינוּ, מָגֵן יִשְׁעֵנוּ, אֲתָה הוּא לְדוֹר וָדוֹר,
נֹדֵדָה לָךְ וְנִסְפָּר תְּהִלָּתְךָ,
עַל חַיֵּינוּ הַמְּסוּרִים בְּיַדְךָ,
וְעַל נְשְׁמוֹתֵינוּ הַפְּקוּדוֹת לָךְ,
וְעַל נְסִיךְ שְׁבָכָל יוֹם עִמָּנוּ,
וְעַל נְפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְטוֹבוֹתֶיךָ שְׁבָכָל עֵת, עָרֵב וּבִקֵּר וְצַהֲרַיִם,
הַטּוֹב, כִּי לֹא כָלוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ,
וְהַמְּרַחֵם, כִּי לֹא תָמוּ חֲסָדֶיךָ, מֵעוֹלָם קוִינֵנוּ לָךְ.
וְעַל כָּלֵם יִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִתְרוֹמַם שְׁמֶךָ מִלְּכָנוּ תָמִיד לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
וְכָל הַחַיִּים יוֹדוּךָ סֵלָה,
וַיִּהְיוּ אֶת שְׁמֶךָ בְּאֵמֶת,
הָא-ל יִשׁוּעַתָּנוּ וְעִזְרַתָּנוּ סֵלָה.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', הַטּוֹב שְׁמֶךָ וְלָךְ נָאָה לְהוֹדוֹת.

*Modim Anachnu Lach,
 Sha-atah hu Adonai Eloheinu veilohei avoteinu, l'olam va-ed,
 tzur chayeinu, magein yisheinu, atah hu l'dor vador
 nodeh l'cha u-n'sapeir t'hilatecha
 al chayeinu ham'surim b'yadecha,
 v'al nishmoteinu hap'kudot lach,
 v'al nisecha sheb'chol yom imanu,
 v'al nifl'otecha v'tovotecha sheb'chol eit, erev vavoker v'tzahorayim,
 hatov ki lo chalu rachamecha,
 v'ham'racheim ki lo amu chasadecha, meiolam kivinu lach.
 V'al kulam yitbarach v'yitromam shimcha malkeinu tamid l'olam va-ed.
 V'chol hachayim yoducha selah, vi-hal'lu et shimcha be-emet
 ha-eil y'shuateinu v'ezratenu selah.
 Baruch Atah Adonai, hatov shimcha ul'cha na-eh l'hodot.*

Thanks from us to You,
 for You are Adonai our God and the God of our ancestors forever and ever;
 the Rock of our lives, the Shield of our salvation through every generation.
 We will give thanks to You and declare Your praise --
 for our lives which are committed into Your hand,
 and for our souls which are in Your charge,
 and for Your miracles, which are every day with us,
 and for Your wonders and Your goodnesses, which are with us at all times,
 evening and morning and noon.

O all-Good, whose mercies do not fail;
 O Merciful One, whose lovingkindnesses never cease, we have ever hoped in You.
 For all these acts Your Name, O our King, shall be continually blessed and exalted forever and ever.
 And everything that lives shall give thanks to You forever,
 and shall praise Your Name in truth, O God, our salvation and our help. (Selah.)
 Praised Are You, Adonai, whose Name is All-good, and unto whom it is fitting to give thanks.

This passage is generally referred to as our daily thanksgiving prayer. Note that, although the English translation is usually rendered “we give thanks to you,” the text actually says “Thanks [from] us to you” -- so the emphasis is on *thanks* -- not on *us*. And the sense of thankfulness expressed by the text runs deep and wide through our consciousness. The opening section is reminiscent of the opening b'rachah of the Amidah (discussed in *Pray and Mean It #3*) -- “God of our ancestors,” “Shield of our salvation” -- and indeed this portion in the Amidah supplies us with the second set of bows: we bowed twice in the opening b'rachah, at its opening and closing. And we bow again now on the words *Modim Anachnu Lach* and on the *Baruch Atah Adonai* at this b'rachah's closing. Far more important than the choreography, though, is the ecstatic expression of thankfulness -- for our lives, for our souls, for Your miracles, for Your wonders and Your goodnesses (and here's the real kicker:) *which are with us at all times, evening and morning and noon*.

At this moment, we can connect to the unfathomable blessing of our existence -- and of our ability to be aware of that existence. Every breath that we take is a gift received greater than any gift we can ever bestow. The mere fact of our existence defies mathematical probability in ways

that we can barely calculate. Every step we take, every word we utter, every thought we have -- these are miracles from which we benefit *and* in which we participate!

The prayer continues "O all-good, whose mercies do not fail; O Merciful One, whose lovingkindnesses never cease, we have ever hoped in You." This makes me reflect on wanting to acquire qualities of mercy and lovingkindness in imitation and appreciation of God. "We have ever hoped in you: *meiolam kivinu lach*." That sense of hope is hugely important to us as individuals -- and as a people. *Kivinu* is the same root as *tikvah* -- hence the word "hope." And that word *tikvah* is such a crucial word to the Zionist part of our souls.

V'chol hachayim yoducha selah -- all that lives gives thanks to You. Every living thing that we look at is a praise to God -- the humans, animals, plant life. These things may most often declare their thankfulness through *our* praises.

The blessing concludes with the words *baruch atah adonai hatov shimcha ul'cha na-eh l'hodot*. Praised are You Adonai -- Your name is good and to You it is becoming to thank. The truth of the matter, of course, is that *we* are the ones who benefit most from this sense of thankfulness. Our tradition certainly holds that God benefits from our praises. But I am convinced (as I hope you are) that the benefits of deep thankfulness accrue to us much more greatly than to God!

So this thanksgiving prayer is primarily about giving thanks and recognizing miracles.

One more word about this seems particularly in order: This text, so cognizant of miracles, is the portion of the Amidah which also accommodates occasional *remarkable* miracles: we add to this thanksgiving prayer the three *al hanisims* that occur over the course of the year: *For the miracles* of Chanukah, of Purim, and of Yom Ha-atzmaut (Israel Independence Day). These miracle holidays make sense to us spiritually when we can add the special miracles to a miracle text that we recite each and every day each time we recite the Amidah!

I find that when I am reciting this text, it is hard not to smile -- and to feel a sense of goodness and completeness that I might carry with me after I have finished my prayers. I don't recommend saying *only* the Modim prayer in the course of daily prayer -- but I *do* believe that connecting with this prayer alone can probably set our hearts and minds on the right track to a happier life, and to a life enabling us to share our happiness and thankfulness with others.

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