

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. 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 9

This is the 9th installment in this series.

With **שִׁים שְׁלוֹם** (Sim Shalom), we come to the last b'rachah of the Amidah -- as we complete the shell which is almost unchanging as the beginning and ending of the Amidah. (As previously noted, the daily Amidah has 19 blessings; the Shabbat or Festival Amidah has 7. Each begins and ends with essentially the same 3 blessings -- leaving 13 in the middle that we will discuss in subsequent weeks.)

שִׁים שְׁלוֹם -- Sim Shalom -- is, for better or worse, possibly the best known paragraph of the Amidah. I say this because, as the “prayer for peace” it is both too well known and not enough known. What do I mean by this? It is far too easy to say “let us pray for peace” and really DO nothing about it. Peace is not a simple matter. Shalom, after all, is from the same root as *shalem* -- full. So we know that the Jewish idea of peace is not merely a lack of war -- but a fullness of every good possibility in the universe. God is not going to supply this for us on God's own. We must be very active partners in this process, and I believe that the text indicates this quite clearly, though it also feels to me that this has escaped our notice much of the time.

First, here's the text. . . .

שִׁים שְׁלוֹם בְּעוֹלָם טוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה
חוֹ וְחֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמֶּךָ.
בְּרַכְנוּ, אָבִינוּ, בְּלָנוּ כְּאַחַד בְּאוֹר פְּנִיךָ,
כִּי בְּאוֹר פְּנִיךָ נִתְּתָה לָנוּ, ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ,
תּוֹרַת חַיִּים וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד, וְיִצְדָּקָה וּבְרָכָה וְרַחֲמִים וְחַיִּים וְשְׁלוֹם,
וְטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְבָרֶךְ אֶת עַמֶּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל יְת וּבְכָל שְׁעָה בְּשְׁלוֹמֶךָ.
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', הַמְּבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשְׁלוֹם.

*Sim shalom ba-olam tovah uvrachah,
Chen vachessed v'rachamim aleinu v'al kol yisrael amecha.
Barcheinu avinu kulanu k'echad b'or panecha,
Ki v'or panecha natata lanu, Adonai Eloheinu,
Torat chayim v'ahavat chesed, utz'dakah uv'rachah v'rachamim v'chayim v'shalom,
V'tov b'einecha l'vareich et amcha Yisrael b'chol eit uv'chol sha-ah bishlomecha.
Baruch Atah Adonai, Ham'vareich et amo Yisrael bashalom.*

Grant peace everywhere -- goodness and blessing,
grace, lovingkindness and mercy to us and unto all Israel, Your people.
Bless us, our Father, all of us as one with the light of Your face;
For by the light of Your face You have given us, Adonai our God,
the Torah of life, and love of kindness, and righteousness and blessing and mercy and life and peace;
And may it be good in Your eyes to bless Your people Israel at all times and in every hour with
Your peace. Praised are You, Adonai, who blesses Your people Israel with peace.

Issue #1 -- Who is this peace *for*? The most traditional version of the text is merely *Sim shalom tovah uvrachah* etc. (Grant peace, goodness and blessing etc.) 20th century versions of the text have included (among others) Sim shalom *baolam* tovah uvrachah etc. and Sim shalom tovah uvrachah *baolam* etc. In other words, Grant peace [*baolam/*everywhere], goodness and blessing [*baolam/*everywhere] etc.

Other additional accommodations in some places have been made to give the text a more universal quality. But there's no getting around where it ultimately leads: *Praised are You, Adonai, who blesses Your people Israel with peace.* It simply was not intended as a universal prayer. That's okay -- as a people we have always certainly had our hands full hoping for just a bit of peace for the people (not to mention the land) Israel. It's especially okay if we are aware of the incorporation of the more universal language as a reminder that we need to be mindful of having aspirations for peace for all. We can't change the past. We *can* change the future.

Issue #2 -- In my experience, it has been quite common for rabbis, after the recitation of the silent Amidah, to read the translation of Sim Shalom aloud. This is understandable -- but gives the sense that this "prayer for peace" is either the culmination or a summary of the Amidah. One could probably make a reasonable argument on behalf of either, but the usual effect is just to get into our heads "Grant us peace" as the only thing we're taking away from the Amidah -- and a failure to connect with the sublime road map to peace that follows -- unless one reads the entire paragraph with feeling and conviction.

Barcheinu avinu kulanu k'echad b'or panecha -- Bless us our Father -- all of us as one in the light of Your face. What a beautiful expression! And it's just getting warmed up! (More about that in a moment.)

Let's wrestle for a moment with *avinu* (our Father): this is a word that is at once intimate and at the same time potentially distancing (in a negative way). Our human fathers are among the most important figures in our lives. And talking to God in this personal way can be a beautiful thing. At the same time, we need be conscious of the masculinity inherent in the language. There are times that I will alter the gender in my mind when I'm praying. *Bless us our mother* is a) as powerful an image, b) even more powerful, or c) distracting. Your choice -- your experience. You need to find your personal balance in this matter. Even if you wouldn't choose to put more of the feminine in your God language, you ought to be understanding of those for whom it is important. And if you're someone to whom it's important, I hope that you would be understanding of those for whom it is jarring and uncomfortable. At any rate, we've got to face the fact that God our *parent* is not an improvement on God our father. At least not in our generation.

Back to what we were getting warmed up about. . . *Ki v'or panecha natata lanu*. . . The text repeats the imagery of the light of God's face (which is also a reference back to the *birkat kohanim* -- the priestly blessing which is recited during the repetition of the Amidah just *before* Sim Shalom). It uses the repetition of this imagery as a hinge -- *because* in the light of Your face You have given to us *torat chayim, v'ahavat chesed utz'dakah uv'rachah v'rachamim v'chayim v'shalom*. These are the ample tools that God has given us to achieve peace: The Torah of life, and love of kindness and righteousness and blessing and mercy and life and peace. Although much of this can be understood as the stuff that God can bless us with, it seems to me that it's more importantly a list of things that God has placed into our hands in order to enable us to bring peace into the world.

You have given to us

<i>Torat chayim</i>	Torah of life -- or laws of life
<i>Ahavat chesed</i>	Love of kindness -- or love of lovingkindness
<i>Tz'dakah</i>	Righteousness -- often rendered (confusingly) "charity"
<i>B'rachah</i>	Blessing
<i>Rachamim</i>	Mercy
<i>Chayim</i>	Life
<i>Shalom</i>	Peace

We could write pages about each of these qualities -- what they mean -- how we achieve them. But the genius of *Sim Shalom* is just to lay them right out there for us in glorious simplicity -- every morning, every day.

It's hard for me not to feel uplifted and cheered in reciting this litany of good work. I find that, when I focus on these words, I do feel *literally* lifted up.

As we finish the Amidah, it's marvelous to refill our intellectual, emotional and spiritual tool box!

One should note also that the list ends with *shalom*. Which, of course, was where the discussion began! *Shalom* is at the same time one of the tools in the box *and* the end point of using those tools!

May we be workers who will bring peace into God's world. May God grant us the strength and the wisdom to understand how to use those tools.

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