

# *Prayer: History, Problems, Solutions*

## **Biblical Sources**

Among the many issues readers have mentioned in their queries were the role of mandatory prayer in schools, the amount of time dedicated daily to prayers, the difficulty of finding meaning, length, repetition, inability to understand the words, and the judgmental approach towards, or the feelings of guilt of those who cannot follow all the laws of prayers as detailed in Shulhan Arukh and the numerous works following it.

To address some of these issues, I would like to present a historic overview of prayer in Jewish sources, with the hope that understanding the roots and development of prayer will assist the readers in making the right decisions, which might be different when dealing with individuals, with one's children, or with the community.

Let us examine the biblical sources which deal with prayers of individuals and groups. I will only present here verses which can be literally understood as dealing with prayer, and not those which are interpreted as such by the Midrash. For example, the Midrash says that Adam, Cain, and Reuben, fasted and pledged for forgiveness, and that Yitzhak went out to the field at nightfall to pray, but there is no proof for such interpretations in the biblical text, so these sources will not be discussed here.

## **Prayers in the Torah**

As ubiquitous and meticulously detailed as prayer is today, there is no mention in the bible of an established system with set times and fixed texts recited by the community. We find many cases of blessing which invoke God's name, such as Noah's to his children (Gen. 9:26-27), Melchizedek to Abraham (Ibid. 14:19-20) and the blessings granted by Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov to their descendants.

We also find situations where individuals, usually powerful leaders or prophets, negotiate with God for their own benefit or on behalf of others. Abraham questions God's promise of reward

and says that he has no children of his own, basically asking to be blessed with a child (Ibid. 14:3). He also negotiates with God a deal for saving the five cities of the Jordan Valley, including Sodom and Gomorrah (Ibid. 23:18-32). The first mention of the verb פָּלַל – which is commonly understood as “to pray”, is in Genesis 20, when Abraham prays for Abimelech to be cured. It is one of only four instances of prayer mentioned on the Torah, the others all describe Moshe praying after Israel’s major missteps (Num. 11:2; 21:7; Deut. 9:20-26).

Another interesting negotiation is that of Abraham’s servant, who demands God’s assistance to confirm his belief in the covenant of God and Abraham (Gen. 24:12-14). We later find Yitzhak praying for Rivka (Ibid. 25:21) and Yaakov, like Abraham’s servant, conditioning his covenant with God on assistance in his quest and journey.

Other than those events, which deal mostly with the lives of the forefathers, we only find Moshe engaged in prayer, always as a defense attorney for the Israelites.

### **Hannah and the invention of Personal Prayer**

The woman who singlehandedly changed the course of prayer for generations to come was a barren woman, who after being teased by her co-wife, came to the Temple in Shiloh to have a word with God. The story, rendered in the first chapter of I Samuel, raised many questions in Rabbinic times, the most pressing of which is the inability of the High Priest, Eli, to understand what was happening right in front of him.

In I Samuel, chapter 1, we read of Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninah. Hannah was barren, while Peninah had many sons and daughters. Whenever Elkanah would go up to the Temple at Shiloh, the whole family would travel with him to take part in the pilgrimage and the offerings. Elkanah, who was in charge of serving the food, made sure to show his special love for Hannah by giving her a double portion. Peninah, however, did not let Hannah bask in her husband's attention and teased her constantly, bringing her to tears and frustration. The teasing was most probably done in a subtle manner, in a way indecipherable to Elkanah, who as a man failed to understand the intricate relationships between his two wives. Peninah might have done

it by making a point of asking her children to pass her things or by complaining that she is tired after toiling with them all day. Be it as it may, Elkanah did not understand Hannah's pain and tried to comfort her by saying that he is better for her than ten sons.

Hannah, caught up in an emotional maelstrom, rose from her seat and went to pray at the Temple. It is not clear in which part of the Temple she prayed, but it seems that she went inside and passed by the High Priest, Eli, who was sitting at the door. As the High Priest watched her intently, Hannah first formulated a deal with God, just like Abraham's servant and Yaakov before her, suggesting that if God grants her a child he will be dedicated to God's service. Following the 26 words recorded in the bible, we are told that she kept on praying for a long time - הִרְבָּתָה לְהִתְפַּלֵּל - but she only mouthed the words voicelessly.

Eli, watching her from the side, decided that the strange woman is drunk and rebuked her. "Enough with the drinking, woman," he scolded her, "it is time to sober up!"

Hannah, who we can assume was shocked and hurt, responded humbly that she is not a drunkard but rather a woman undergoing tremendous pain - אִשָּׁה קָשָׁת רוּחַ אֲנִכִּי. "Please do not see me as a low-life," she begs, "it is only because of my need to talk and my anger that I have spoken so far."

As mentioned previously, commentators were perplexed by the exchange between Eli and Hannah. Wasn't the High Priest aware that people come to the Temple to pray? How could he consider Hannah a drunkard for not raising her voice?

The Vilna Gaon explains that Eli consulted his breast plate, on which the engraved letters would light up to deliver a prophetic message. Eli's task was to form a meaningful message from the letters, but he misinterpreted the letters כְּשָׂרָה (like Sarah, i.e. barren) or כְּשָׂרָה (righteous) and read instead שְׂכָרָה (drunkard). The Vilna Gaon's interpretation, despite its brilliant wordplay, is highly improbable. If God wanted to tell Eli something about Hannah, the word עֲקָרָה (barren) would have been perfect. Additionally, how can a prophet to not understand the prophetic message? Indeed, Rashi suggests that the reason for Eli's reaction was that people at the time did not use to pray quietly. This commentary is more plausible, but we should still have expected Eli to be able to guess that the woman in front him is engaged in prayer.

## **The First to Pray for Herself**

The answer, I believe, is that until Hannah, only the prophet or the leader would be allowed to address God in prayer. As we have seen in our survey of the Torah, it is either one of the Patriarchs or Moshe who engages in prayers for others. The leader serves as an intermediary between God and the people. That is why Eli could not interpret Hannah's behavior as prayer. If she had a request or a pledge she was supposed to turn to him, the High Priest, to bring her case before God.

Hannah, in a revolutionary, and one might even say rebellious, act, challenged all that. Her act was probably a result of the combination of yearning for a child for so many years, being teased by Peninah, and what she saw as a lack of understanding on behalf of her husband. She felt compelled to defy authority and norms and to approach the sanctuary herself so she could converse with God. She did not want anyone to be involved in the process so she deliberately mouthed the words voicelessly. She was so immersed in her prayers, and indeed felt that she was talking to God, when Eli interrupted her with his rebuke.

Her response should be understood as one which fuses embarrassment and defiance. She is embarrassed that he has thought such things of her, but she states that because of her anger and frustration she spoke so far, meaning that she felt entitled to breach the boundaries and walk the physical and metaphorical distance to the place of prayer.

The prayer of Hannah thus becomes a beacon of light to all future generations. How we wish that we could be so deeply immersed in prayer, so intimately connected to God and to ourselves...

It is not a coincidence that in many traditions, the first prayer read in the morning is the second prayer of Hannah, the one which she chanted as she fulfilled her promise and brought young Samuel to Shiloh, and whose text is known to us (I Sam. 2:1-10). pray using Tanakh or Siddur?

## **The Biblical Siddur**

So far we have discussed the concept of Prayer at the time of the forefathers and the early prophets. Let us now examine the texts of prayers in the bible. Most of the biblical prayers incorporated into the Siddur were taken from Psalms, probably the most powerful prayer book

ever written. There are many verses and chapters, scattered throughout Prophets and Scriptures, which present beautiful and heart wrenching prayers, but the Psalms anthology overwhelms them all.

For those readers who would like to brush their Bible skills I would recommend revisiting the following paragraphs (some of which are familiar from the Siddur or the Haftarah):

Isaiah 12:1-6; 21:1-26:19; 40:1-26; 42:5-9; 49:14-21; 52:7-11; 55:6-56:7; 57:15-19; 58:6-14; 61:10-62:9; 66:10-14;

Jeremiah 10:1-10; 17:7-17; 31:1-16; Hosea 2:21-25; Jonah 2:3-10; Micah 4:1-7; 6:6-8; Habakkuk 3:1-6; Job 10:1-22 (this paragraph expresses an extremely dark mood); 28:12-28; 38:1-39:30; Song of Songs 5:1-8; 7:11-8:7; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; 11:1-12:7; Daniel 9:18-19; Nehemiah 1:5-11;

### **Psalms Versus the Siddur**

We can distinguish three main categories when we examine the origins of our daily prayers: The bible, Rabbinic literature, and texts influenced by Kabbalah, which entered the Siddur from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and on. In addition, the holidays' prayers include ancient poetry, of the Spanish Golden Age in the Sephardic Siddur, and of the Eretz Yisrael 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century poets in the Ashkenazi one. We will come back to the texts in the siddur later, but for now it will suffice to say that there is a stark difference between the biblical and rabbinic texts, in the sense that while the Rabbinic texts tend to be repetitive and cumulative, adding nouns and superlatives. Rabbinic texts also dwell heavily on the concepts of national exile and redemption, the Chosen People, as well as sin, transgression and forgiveness. Let us take for example the opening paragraph of the Amidah:

האל הגדול הגבור והנורא אל עליון, גומל חסדים טובים, קונה הכל, וזוכר חסדי אבות, ומביא גואל לבני  
בניהם למען שמו באהבה, מלך עוזר ומושיע ומגן

*The great, mighty, and revered, God, supreme God, who rewards [us] with beneficent kindness, the creator of all, who recalls the loyalty of the fathers, and who sends the*

*redeemer to their children's children, with love, for His name's sake, the King who supports, saves, and protects...*

This is one of the more elegant and beautiful paragraphs of the Amidah and of Rabbinic texts, and it carries a special meaning for us since we have been chanting it, as a nation, for almost 2,000 years. Yet when we look at the translation we realize that we address God with 11 consecutive titles, and that while we praise Him we also ask Him to keep the covenant and redeem us, thus throwing in the idea of being chosen and that of the covenant.

Now, when we turn to the psalms which were included in the Siddur we might feel that they have a similar structure, but that is because the psalms chosen by the authors of the Siddur were those which most closely resembled their style of prayer. We thus find the last six psalms, which praise God in a repetitive, albeit poetic and metric, manner.

Even those psalms, however, differ greatly from rabbinic texts. They use literary devices such as alternating between first and third person and responsive chanting. They are also less concerned with the idea of Israel as the chosen people, and rather emphasize the concept of social justice, trustworthiness, and intimate relationship with God.

### **Psalm 145**

The famous “Ashrei” actually starts not with Ashrei but with different words: Tehila LeDavid, and it moves back and forth between addressing God in the second and third person. This dynamic is woven into psalm 145 as a subliminal message, and it is probably the main reason for its popularity. While there are other psalms written in Alphabetical order, psalm 145 is unique in creating this hidden dialogue. To illustrate the dynamic in the psalm, here is the text, with the verses where God is addressed in the second person in bold type (if we count how many verses for second and third person, we will have the following pattern: 2,1,4,2,2,1,1,1,2,5):

תְּהִלָּה לְדָוִד אֱרוֹמָמְךָ אֱלוֹהֵי הַמַּלְאָךְ וְאַבְרָכָה שְׁמֶךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: בְּכָל־יוֹם אֲבָרְכֶךָ וְאַהֲלִלָה שְׁמֶךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:  
 אֲדוֹל יְיָ וּמְהִלָּל מֵאֵד וְלִגְדֹלְתוֹ אֵין חֶקֶר:

דָּוָר לְדוֹר וְשִׁבְחָה מִעֲשָׂוִיָּה וּגְבוּרַתֶּיהָ נִגִּידוּ: הַזֵּר כְּבוֹד הוֹדָה וְדַבְרֵי נִפְלְאוֹתֶיהָ אֲשִׁיחָה: וְעֲזוּזוֹ גּוֹרְאוֹתֶיהָ יֹאמְרוּ  
 וּגְדוּלַתָּהּ אֲסַפְּרֶנָּה: זְכַר רַב־טוֹבָהּ נִבְיָעוּ וְצִדְקַתָּהּ יִרְגְּנוּ:  
 סָנְוֹן וּרְחוּם יְיָ אֶרְךָ אֲפִים וּגְדֹל־חֶסֶד: טוֹב־יְיָ לְכֹל יְרַחֲמֵיו עַל־כָּל־מַעֲשָׂוִי:  
 יוֹדֶהָ יְיָ כָּל־מַעֲשָׂוִיָּה וְחַסִּידֶיהָ יִבְרַכּוּכָה: כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתָּהּ יֹאמְרוּ וּגְבוּרַתָּהּ יִדְבְּרוּ:  
 לְהוֹדִיעַ לְבַנְיָ הָאָדָם גְּבוּרַתָּהּ וְכְבוֹד הַזֵּר מַלְכוּתוֹ:  
 מַלְכוּתָּהּ מַלְכוּת כָּל־עֲלָמִים וּמַמְשַׁלְתָּהּ בְּכָל־דָּוָר וְדוֹר:  
 סוּמְךָ יְיָ לְכָל־הַנְּפֻלִים יְזוּלְךָ לְכָל־הַכְּפוּפִים:  
 עֵינַי־כָּל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאַתָּה נוֹתַר־לָהֶם אֶת־אֲכָלָם בְּעַתּוֹ: פּוֹתַח אֶת־יַדְּךָ וּמַשְׁבִּיעַ לְכָל־חַי רִצּוֹן:  
 צְדִיק יְיָ בְּכָל־דְּרָכָיו יְחַסֵּיד בְּכָל־מַעֲשָׂוִי: קָרוֹב יְיָ לְכָל־קוֹרְאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְּאַמְתּוֹ: רִצּוֹן־יִרְאֵיו יַעֲשֶׂה וְאֶת־  
 שׁוֹעֲתָם אֲשַׁמֵּעַ וְיוֹשִׁיעֵם: שׁוּמְרָ יְיָ אֶת־כָּל־אֲהַבָּיו וְאֶת־כָּל־הַרְשָׁעִים יִשְׁמִיד: תְּהַלֵּל יְיָ יִדְבָר־פִּי וּיְבַרְךָ כָּל־בָּשָׂר שָׁם  
 קִדְּשׁוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

## Psalm 146

This psalm opens with a common motif, that of trusting fully in God and not in transient humans, but it is its end which delivers a powerful message in the way it describes God. Although God is referred to in the last verse as the God of Zion, in verses 7-9 He is the one who cares for all humans, and specifically for the weak and oppressed:

עֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט לְעֲשׂוּקִים, נָתַן לָחֶם לְרַעֲבִים, מָתִיר אֲסוּרִים, פָּקַח עֵינָיִם, זָקַף כְּפוּפִים, אֲהַב צְדִיקִים, שָׁמַר אֶת־  
 גְּרָמִים, יָתוּם וְאֶלְמָנָה יַעֲזֹד

*He delivers justice to the oppressed, bread to the hungry; He sets free the imprisoned, opens the eyes of the blind, straightens the back of the bent; He loves those who walk in uprightness, protects the sojourners, and uplifts the spirit of the orphans and widows.*

## Psalm 147

Here again God appears as one who cares for the needy, but this time it is an emotional need:

הֲרַפָּא לְשִׁבּוּרֵי לֵב וּמְחַבֵּשׁ לְעֲצֻבוֹתָם

*He heals those with a broken heart, He treats their sorrow...*

This psalm also presents, like psalm 145, rapid transition between two roles of God. He is described on one hand as the Creator who controls planets and natural elements, and on the other as the one who pays attention to the smallest and most neglected creatures, whether the crow's fledglings, or humans marginalized by society. The two concepts merge in the two beautiful verses dedicated to winter phenomena:

הַנִּתְּנָהוּ שֶׁלֶג כַּצֹּמֶר, כְּפֹר כַּאֶפֶר יִפְזֹר, מִשְׁלֵיהַ קָרְחָהוּ כְּפִתִּים

*He spreads snow like wool, frost like ashes, He throws His ice like breadcrumbs...*

God is described as mighty and awesome in His control of the elements, but He also projects the innocent excitement of little children playing in winter wonderland and allowing their imagination to run wild. God is both transcendent and immediate, aloof and intimate, and that makes our relationship with Him intriguing and compelling.

### **Psalms 148-150**

This psalm is a flood of praise, continuous, melodious, punctuated here and there by general exclamations:

הַלְלוּ אֶת־ה' מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם הַלְלוּהוּ בַמְרוֹמִים, הַלְלוּהוּ כָל־מַלְאָכָיו הַלְלוּהוּ כָל־צְבָאָיו, הַלְלוּהוּ שְׁמֵשׁ וַיָּרֵחַ הַלְלוּהוּ כָל־כּוֹכָבֵי אֹר... יִהְיֶה לְלוֹ אֶת־שֵׁם ה' כִּי הוּא צְנִיָּה וְנִבְרָאוּ... הַלְלוּ אֶת־ה' מִן־הָאָרֶץ תְּנִינִים וְכָל־תְּהוֹמוֹת, אֵשׁ וְבָרָד שֶׁלֶג וְקִיטּוֹר רוּחַ סְעָרָה עֹשֶׂה דְבָרוֹ, הַהָרִים וְכָל־גְּבְעוֹת עֵץ פְּרִי וְכָל־אֲרָזִים... מַלְכֵי־אָרֶץ וְכָל־לְאָמִים שְׂרִים וְכָל־שֹׁפְטֵי אָרֶץ בַּחוּרִים וְגַם־בָּתוּלוֹת...

*Praise God in heavens, in His lofty abode; Praise Him, messengers and hosts, sun and moon, shining stars... they will praise God who commanded them to be...*

*Praise God from the earth, sea creatures and abysses, fire, hail, snow and vapor... mountains, hilltops, fruit trees and cedars...; kings, nations, ministers and judges; young men and women...*

Psalms 149 and 150 continue with the theme of praise and celebration. This should not be taken for granted, as there are many psalms which reflect a very dark and contentious mood, a direct result of David's tumultuous life.

It seems that the author chose to end Psalms on a high note to convey the message that despite all difficulties, one can pick himself up, try to find the positive in his life, and pull forward for the sake of family, friends, and creation. It is a message which helped the Jewish People during harsh times, and it is one which made Tehillim, or Psalms, one of the most powerful prayer books ever.

### **Saying Other Psalms**

In the previous post, we have discussed the messages and concepts conveyed by Psalms 145-150, but as fascinating as these messages are, I have heard from numerous people that they find it difficult to be inspired by the same six chapters day after day. On the other hand, there are those who tell me that they love these psalms and cannot wait to recite them daily. I believe that the different reactions stem from the diversity of human nature. Some people find comfort in the familiar and like to revisit the same texts and rituals on a regular basis, while others are more adventurous and curious and look constantly look for ways to enrich their experience and introduce novel concepts to their lives.

Other important factors are the frequency of prayer, what one expects to achieve by it, and even by the way the services are conducted. Obviously, the constant repetition could be more difficult for one who attends Minian daily and who has been doing it since childhood, then for someone who discovered Judaism at an older age. Also, if one arrives at the synagogue with the hope to be inspired and uplifted, chances are that in most cases he will be disappointed, except maybe for special occasions such as holidays or personal moments of joy and sorrow. If one, however, comes to the synagogue in order to fulfil his duty toward God, to punch his card, and to recite the required texts, he might not care at all how the services affected his religious, mental, or emotional state, as long as he have read every single word.

As to the way the services are conducted, I can attest from experience to many synagogues where the reading of the daily psalms, or as they are called in Aramaic Pesuke DeZimra, is [almost] a torture. This is especially true in Sephardic synagogues, where the Hazzan reads the whole prayer. Too often I would find myself listening to a hazzan rushing through Pesuke DeZimra, at times garbling words or swallowing letters, just because there was a deadline for

finishing the prayers or saying the Amidah at sunrise. In other occasions I would hear a Hazzan read the psalms monotonously, with no rhythm or melody, making it sound repetitive and never-ending.

To those who feel that way, and still want to recite the prayers in the traditional way, with Pesuke DeZimra leading to the Shema, I would like to offer the following solution: choose your own psalms!

Yes, leaf through Tehillim, or the other inspiring paragraphs from Tanakh, some of which I have listed previously, and find those you would like to say daily. You can recite each day a different one, and even use poetry by later authors as part of Pesuke DeZimra. If this will lead to a more meaningful prayer, than it will be well worth it.

### **Is the Order of Pesuke DeZimra Rigid?**

We are not dealing here with changing the order of the prayer in the public realm but rather at the individual level, or at the level of small prayer groups. Pesuke DeZimra is basically an introduction to the main parts of the prayer, the Shema and the Amidah, which was still in a state of influx at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the invention of the printing press. The unit of psalms 145-150 remained steady since the time of Rav Amram Gaon (9<sup>th</sup> century) who laid the foundations for our modern-day Siddur. Other parts, however, were more fluid<sup>1</sup>.

Not only that, but until the 13<sup>th</sup> century poets who felt that Pesuke DeZimra needed an injection of interest and excitement, added beautiful pieces of liturgy before, during, or following that unit. With the establishment of the printed siddur, and because of Kabbalistic influences, these poems, or Piyyutim, were uprooted and are now recited before Barukh She-Amar or after the Amidah.

In the Moroccan tradition, until today, there is a pause before Barukh She-Amar, where different Piyyutim are sung each Shabbat.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Avraham David ben Asher of Bucazacs writes, in reference to the changes introduced to the Siddur by the Ari and his disciples, that it is fine to make changes in Pesuke DeZimra<sup>2</sup> - שאין בו קפידא דאיסורא -

To conclude, let us refer to the statement of Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel, who explains the purpose of Pesuke DeZimra<sup>3</sup>:

אין השכינה שורה על ישראל אלא מתוך שמחה שנאמר ועתה קחו לי מנגן והיה כנגן המנגן שכן מצינו  
בנביאים הראשונים שסיימו דבריהם בדברי שבח ותנחומים ולכך נהגו לומר פסוקי דזמרה ואשרי קודם תפלה  
כדי לעמוד בתפלה מתוך דבר שמחה של מצוה שעוסק בד"ת

*The Divine Providence dwells among us only when we are joyous, as we see that the prophet Elisha required a musician to be divinely inspired. We also find that the early prophets used to conclude their prophecies with words of praise and consolation. That is the reason for reciting Pesuke DeZimra and Ashre before the Tefila (i.e. Amidah)...*

Rabbenu Asher speaks of Pesuke Dezimra as an introduction to the Amidah. The psalms we chant daily are meditative and preparatory tools, means towards being inspired and moved.

According to that, one would be allowed, and even encouraged, to individually add segments to this unit of Tefilah in order to achieve that goal, which so often, unfortunately, seems unattainable.

### **Alternative Psalms**

Here is a partial list of psalms one might want to use at certain points in the prayer, as discussed above, with some key verses from each:

*8: ...I look up to the heavens, Your handiwork, the moon and stars You have created [and I think] what is man that You took account of him and made him only a little lesser than God...*

*13: ...until when, Adonai? Will You forever forget me? Will You forever hide Your face from me?...*

*15: ...Adonai, who will dwell in Your tent? ...He who is upright, honest, and speaks truth. He who neither talks of others nor harms them...*

*40: ...Adonai, my God, Your wonders and thoughts of us are beyond my ability to express... You do not want sacrifices and offerings, rather You listen to me*

**49** (this psalm is read at the mourner's house, but is well worth to be read more frequently): ...there are those who rely on their might, who praise themselves for their wealth... but one cannot pay his life's ransom... the wise and the fool all [eventually] perish, leaving their fortunes to others... one does not take all to the grave, his possessions to not go down with him, yet the soul which was blessed in life, will be praised [in death] for doing good unto others...

**51**: ...create for me a pure heart and renew in me a firm spirit, do not cast me away and do not deprive me of Your divine guidance... You do not ask for sacrifices... but You will not reject my broken heart...

**63**: [in the Judean desert] Elohim, You are my God, I seek You at dawn. My soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, as I wander through arid land, deprived of water...

**69** (this is a psalm with a darker mood, where the author speaks of rejection, loneliness, and betrayal. We do not associate these with prayers, but these are powerful feelings which should find a channel of expression):

...help me, Elohim! I am drowning, sinking in quicksand and cannot stand... I am exhausted of crying out to You, my throat is burning, my eyes gone as I vainly await You... I was rejected by my brothers, alienated by my mother's children... I was mocked by street dwellers and the drunkards sing my mockery... do not hide Your face from me... come close to my soul, redeem it!...

**88** (this psalm can easily be titled "The Bible's Darkest Chapter". Unlike many psalms which deal with the author's troubles and suffering, but end on a positive note, this one ends with the word "darkness"):

...I cry out to You at day, pleaded with You at night... I was considered among the dead, the ones You have forgotten... You have distanced my friends from me... why do You abandon my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me?... Your anger flooded me, Your nightmares paralyzed me... I was left with no friend or acquaintance; Darkness!

**103** (back to a brighter mood): ...my soul, bless Adonai! Do not forget His kindness. He forgave your sins, He healed your ailments... He crowned you with mercy and loving kindness... as a father cares for his sons so Adonai cares for us... my soul, bless Adonai!

*112: ...happy is the man who reveres Adonai and who craves His commandments... in darkness, he is a shining light for the righteous, he is gracious, merciful, and upright. He supports [his fellowmen] with charity or loans, he conducts his business and affairs ethically...*

*139: ...where shall I run away from Your spirit, where shall I hide from You. If I rise to the heavens – You are there; I go down to the netherworld – You are there. Even if I fly on the wings of dawn to the remote corners of the ocean, Your hand will guide me, Your arm will sustain me...*

This is of course a partial list which might not appeal to all readers and which represents my inclinations. It is also an open invitation to revisit the Bible and find verses each one of us resonates with.

I will conclude this list by going back to a short psalm, almost a Haiku (23 words), in which the author describes his closeness to God and full trust in Him with a metaphor of a baby and a mother. This psalm is so short that I will present it here in its entirety:

**Psalm 131:**

[שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד]

יְיָ לֹא־גִבֹּה לִבִּי וְלֹא־רָמוּ עֵינַי

וְלֹא־הִלַּכְתִּיו בְּגִדְלוֹת וּבִנְפִלְאוֹת מִמֶּנִּי

אִם־לֹא שָׁוִיתִיו וְדוּמָמְתִי כְפִשִׁי

כְּגִמֵּל עָלַי אִמּוֹ כְּגִמֵּל עָלַי נַפְשִׁי

[יְחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְיָ מִעֲתָה וְעַד־עוֹלָם]

*Adonai, my heart is not arrogant, my eyes not haughty,*

*I did not attempt to achieve that which is greater than me,*

*I have balanced and quieted my soul,*

*Like a baby [cuddles] with his mother, so is my soul with me...*

In addition to biblical verses, one can use poetry as inspiration in prayer, choosing each day or each week a different paragraph to recite. There are several anthologies of Hebrew poetry I would recommend, such as for example *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* by T. Carmi, and *The Dream of the Poem* by Peter Cole.

### Prayers=Sacrifices: Are We at Fault Again?

רבי יהושע בן לוי אמר: תפלות כנגד תמידין תקנום

*Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi said: Prayers were established as a substitute for the daily sacrifices.*<sup>4</sup>

"ונשלמה פרים שפתינו" - אמר רבי אבהו: מי משלם אותם הפרים שהיינו מקריבים לפניך? שפתינו - בתפילה שאנו מתפללים לפניך

*"We shall pay for the sacrifices with our lips" (Hosea 14:3). Rabbi Avho said: who pays [i.e. replaces] those oxen we used to sacrifice to You? Our lips, through the prayers we pray to You.*<sup>5</sup>

These two very famous paragraphs both point at a fundamental relationship between sacrifices and prayers. This is of course a result of the deep void caused by the destruction of the Second Temple. As we shall later see, although tradition attributes the texts of certain prayers to Ezra the Scribe and the Great Assembly, starting in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, it seems that the prayers were formed and established after the destruction. As we shall see in the passages from the Bible cited below, as well as from the story of Hannah and the book of Psalms, people offered prayers already at the time of the Temple. What was different back then is that there were no set times or a fixed formula for those prayers.

The point, however, is not the exact time of the composition and institution of the prayers, but rather their function and role in our daily life. Let us first point out the main the difference between sacrifices and prayers, which is that whereas the sacrifices in the Temple were performed by a small group of priests representing the whole nation, prayers are recited individually, either in private or public settings.

## Why Are There No More Sacrifices?

Most Jewish thinkers agree that the two Temples were destroyed because their purpose were distorted and because people used the sacrifices as a means to pay their “debt” to God without genuinely repenting or changing their ways. Though we do not find this approach in the Torah (except maybe in Balaam’s failed attempt to manipulate God with sacrifices), it abounds in the books of prophets and appears even in psalms. Let us review some of the biblical texts of the harsh criticism delivered by the prophets to those who treated sacrifices, and prayers, as a mechanism of atonement, without ever changing their behavior:

King Saul was commanded to destroy all of Amalek’s possessions, but he spared the livestock and explained that he did so in order to offer sacrifices to God. The prophet Samuel rebuked him (I Sam. 22-23):

הַחֶפֶץ לָהּ בְּעֹלֹת וּזְבָחִים כְּשֹׁמֵעַ בְּקוֹל ה' ? הֲנֵה שְׁמַעַ מִזְבַּח טוֹב לְהִקְשִׁיב מִחֶלֶב אֵילִים

*Does God want burnt-offerings and sacrifices as much as He wants you to listen to Him?*

*Listening is better than sacrifices; paying heed is better than the fat of rams!*

In the first chapter of Isaiah (1:10-17), which serves also as the Haftarah for the Shabbat before Tisha Be’Av, we read:

שָׁמְעוּ דְבַר־ה' קְצִינֵי סֹדֶם הֲאֲנִינוּ תוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ עִם עֲמֻרָה  
 לְמַה־לִּי רַב־זְבָּחֵיכֶם יֹאמְרוּ ה', שְׁבַעְתִּי עֹלֹת אֵילִים וְחֶלֶב מְרִיאִים וְדָם פְּרִים וּכְבָשִׂים וְעֹתוּדִים לֹא חִפְצָתִי  
 כִּי תִבְאוּ לְרֵאוֹת פְּגִי מִי־בִקְשׁוּ נָא מִזְדַּכְּכֶם רִמְסֵי חֲצָרֵי  
 לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ הִבִּיא מִנְחַת־שָׁוֵא קִטְרֵת תוֹעֵבָה הִיא לִי חֲדָשׁ וּשְׁבַת קִרְא מִקְרָא לֹא־אוּכַל אֲנִי וְעֲצָרָה  
 חֲדָשֵׁיכֶם וּמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם שְׁנֵאָה נִפְשֵׁי הֵיוּ עָלַי לְטָרַח גִּלְאִיתִי גִשָׂא  
 וּבְכֹרְשֵׁיכֶם כְּפִיכֶם אֵעָלִים עֵינַי מִכֶּם גַּם כִּי־תִרְבוּ תִפְלֶה אֵינֶנִּי שִׁמְעֵ יְדֵיכֶם דְּמַיִם מְלֹאוּ  
 רִחְצוּ הַזִּכּוֹ הִסִּירוּ רַע מֵעַלְלֵיכֶם מִגִּגְד עֵינַי חֲדָלוּ הִרְעוּ  
 לְמַדּוֹ הֵיטֵב דְרָשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁרוֹ חֲמוֹץ שִׁפְטוֹ יְתוֹם רִיבוֹ אֶל־מִנְהָ

*Listen to Adonai’s word, officers of Sodom, pay heed to the Torah of God, oh nation of Gomorra!*

*I do not need your many sacrifices... I am satiated with your rams... I do not want the blood of oxen, sheep, and rams...*

*You come to see me [you claim], who asked you to trespass my sanctuary?*

*Do not bring vain offerings, your incense is an abomination, I cannot tolerate your new month, Shabbat, and holidays... your assemblies have no positive purpose... I am burdened by your celebration... when you raise your hands in prayer I will look away, and though you utter many prayers I will not hear, [since] your hands are stained with blood [also: robbery]...*

*Wash and purify yourselves... cease your evil deeds... learn well, seek justice, rectify injustice, and protect orphans and widows...*

This passage is particularly significant because the prophet mentions not only sacrifices, but prayers as well. It is very strongly worded, suggesting that God rejects the offerings of the people, whether physical or spiritual, and does not want them to visit His temple. The prophet insists that God's service is not about serving or worshipping Him, but rather about working in His name to bring justice and comfort to the less fortunate.

This theme continues in Isaiah 58 and 59. With what could almost be described as mockery, the prophet at one point mimics the people who are wondering why their prayers are rejected:

ואותי יום יום ידרשון ונתעת דרכי יתפצוון כגוי אשר צדקה עשה ומשפט אלהיו לא עזב ישאלוני משפטי צדק  
 קרבת אלהים יתפצוון  
 למה צמנו ולא ראית ענינו נפשנו ולא תדע הן ביום צמכם תמצאו חפץ וכל עעצביכם תנגשו  
 הן לריב ומצה תצומו ולהקות באגרת רשע לא תצומו כיום להשמיע במרום קולכם  
 הקוה יהיה צום אבחרהו יום ענות אדם נפשו הלכה פאגמן ראשו ושק ואפר יציע הלזה תקרא צום ויום רצון  
 לה'  
 הלא זה צום אבחרהו פתח סרצפות רשע החר אגדות מוטת ושלח רצוצים חפשים וכל מוטת תנתקו  
 הלא פרס לרעב לחמה ועניים מרודים תביא בית כיתרא ערם וכסיתו ומבשרה לא תתעלם

*They seek Me daily! They want to understand My ways! As if they were a just nation, one who follows God's commandments. They demand justice, they ask to be close to God, [asking]: "why have we fasted and you have not seen, why have we afflicted our soul and You did not pay heed?"*

*It is because you dedicate your fast day to your personal affairs and to oppressing the poor!*

*As you fast, you fight and quarrel, striking others with a wicked fist, but you do not make your voice heard up above.*

*Is this the fast day I ask for? A day in which one afflicts his soul, bends as a reed, and wears sackcloth and ashes?*

*Is this the day you would call a fast day, an offering of good will to Adonai?*

*No! This is the fast day I want: release prisoners of injustice and remove the yoke of oppression... share your bread with the hungry, bring the poor into your home, and dress those in need, for all humans are your own flesh and blood...*

Can anyone who attends prayers daily, or who had been to the synagogue during the High Holidays, or who have witnessed the actions of “holy men” who do not practice what they preach, claim that we are no longer plagued by the diseases described by Isaiah?

I have personally witnessed the “wicked fist” during my first Rosh HaShana in America, as a Hazzan, in 1989. At the beginning of the Arvit services, a brief dispute broke over the correct tune for the opening Piyyut in the Sephardic tradition, אהות קטנה, and eventually one congregant was told by another to keep quiet (I’m paraphrasing, of course). At the end of the services, after hearing the uplifting sermon by the rabbi, the offended man got up, turned around, and punched the other man in the face. In the mayhem which followed, I couldn’t help but think of Isaiah 58.

But these poignant words of Isaiah, son of Amotz, came back to haunt me again and again as I witnessed the disconnect between people’s prayer and their behavior. Twenty-five years after that incident, serving as a rabbi, I had the pleasure to listen to a man who was obviously very moved by the prayers. He led the Rosh HaShana and Kippur services with great skill and compassion, at points on the verge of tears, affecting and uplifting the congregation. On the Shabbat following Kippur, however, that same compassionate Hazzan, who was in his late 70’s, publicly insulted another congregant, remarking that it is about time for him to buy a new suit.

I of course interfered and rebuked the man, forcing him to apologize, but I kept mulling over Isaiah’ words in my mind. Here is a man who has been visiting the synagogue daily, for almost seventy years, who has been leading services as a Hazzan, and whose tears roll on his cheeks while praying, but it was obvious that prayers rolled away with the tears, leaving no impression on his personality and behavior. I have countless other stories of encounters with those who

devoutly pray, whether at synagogues or on airplanes, but I would like to go back to Tanakh, so let us move forward in time to the Eve of Destruction and to the prophecies of Jeremiah.

In chapter 7, Jeremiah clearly spells the concept previously mentioned, that the Temple will be destroyed because the people have distorted, misused, and abused its purpose, turning it into an automatic clearing device for their wrongdoing:

שְׁמַעוּ דְבַר־ה' כָּל־יְהוּדָה הַבָּאִים בַּשְּׁעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לָהּ...  
 אֶל־תִּבְטְחוּ לָכֶם אֶל־דְּבַר־יְשַׁקֵּר לֵאמֹר הַיְכָל ה' הַיְכָל ה' הַמָּה  
 כִּי אִם־הִיטִיב תִּיטְיְבוּ אֶת־דַּרְכֵיכֶם וְאֶת־מַעַלְלֵיכֶם אִם־עָשׂוּ תַעֲשׂוּ מִשְׁפָּט בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין רֵעֵהוּ  
 גַּר יְתוֹם וְאֶלְמָנָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּקוּ וְדָם נָקִי אֶל־תִּשְׁפְּכוּ בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה...  
 הַגְּבוּ רֵצֵחַ וְנֹאֵף וְהִשָּׁבַע לַשֶּׁקֶר...  
 וּבְאֵתָם וְעַמְדָתָם לִפְנֵי בַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר נִקְרָא־שְׁמִי עָלָיו וְאַמְרָתָם נִצְּלָנוּ לְמַעַן עֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל־הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה  
*Hear the word of Adonai, oh people of Judah, [all you] who come through these gates to bow down to Adonai...*  
*Do not rely on the false promise of those who claim: The Temple, the Temple, the Temple of Adonai...[it will not help you] unless you correct your ways and your evil actions, if you bring justice to the disputes between one man and another.*  
*Do not oppress the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow, and do not shed the blood of the innocent...*  
*[Do you think that] you can steal, murder, commit adultery, and make false oath... and still come and stand in front of Me, in this house which bears My name, and say: “we are now cleared of sin, so we can go back to commit all those crimes”?*

Jeremiah describes a reality similar to that of Medieval Catholicism, when the church itself sold indulgences, bills that would give their holder the right to enter directly to heaven. It is a concept carried over to confession booths, where one has but to list his sins, get a clean bill of health, and go back to his routine, even if he is a mafia hitman. Though modern Judaism does not come to that, there is still the notion of saying Viduy, routine daily confession, and then back to business as usual.

Towards the end of chapter 7 (21-23), Jeremiah speaks more empathically in the name of God:

*Thus said Adonai... add your burnt-offerings [which are wholly consumed by fire] to your private sacrifices and have a feast, for I have not spoken to your forefathers when I took them out of Egypt regarding sacrifices... but rather about following My pathways...*

It is well known that the truth can be uncomfortable, so it should not have come as a surprise to Jeremiah that the priest and the Temple officials have attempted to kill him. They failed, but even if they succeeded, they could not have eradicated his words. Nor could they erase the words of other prophets who addressed the same issues, such as Amos (5:21-27) who echoes the opening chapter of his contemporary Isaiah (or perhaps Isaiah echoes him).

Another prophet who expresses the same sentiments is Malachi, who was active in the early years of the Second Temple (at around 510 BCE). He rebukes the priests who turned the Temple into their personal coffer, but addresses also the people who see sacrifices as a panacea, a cure-all medicine.

כַּסּוֹת דְּמַעַל אֶת-מִזְבֵּחַ ה' בְּכֵי וּבְאֲנָקָה מֵאֵין עוֹד פְּנוּת אֶל-הַמִּנְחָה וְלִקְחַת רִצּוֹן מִיָּדְכֶם...

וְאִמְרַתֶּם עַל-מָמָה עָל כִּי-הָ' הֵעִיד בֵּינֵךְ וּבֵין אִשְׁתְּ נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בִּגְדַתָּהּ בָּהּ וְהִיא חִבְרַתְּךָ וְאִשְׁתְּ בְּרִיתְךָ

*You have covered Adonai's altar with tears and screams, [so how can I] pay heed to your offering or receive your sacrifices?*

*You ask: "what have we done?"*

*Adonai will testify between you and the wife of your youth whom you have betrayed, the one who was for you a friend and an ally...*

The husband's betrayal of his wife is both a metaphor for idolatry and a reference to adultery, but more than that, it is a symbol for relationships based on self-interest. Just as spouses drift away from each other when their common goals, such as raising a family or buying a house, are achieved, so those who serve God by rote, without being inspired by the prayers, are there only as long as the relationship serves their narrow interests.

We will conclude our journey through this gloomy biblical landscape, an arid desert devoid of spiritual water, speckled with the whitening skeletons of rejected sacrifices, by going back to the days of the First Temple and the Book of Psalms (chapter 50):

שִׁמְעָה עַמּוֹ וְאֲדַבְרָה יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶעֱיֶדָה בְּךָ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲנֹכִי

לֹא עַל־זִבְחֶיךָ אוֹכִינֶךָ וְעוֹלֹתֶיךָ לְנַגְדִי תִמְיֵד  
 לֹא־אֶקַח מִבֵּיתֶךָ פֶּרֶם מִמִּכְלֵאֲתֶיךָ עֲתוּדִים...  
 אִם־אֶרְעֵב לֹא־אֶמַר לָךְ כִּי־לִי תִבְלֵ וּמִלֶּאֱהָ  
 הָאוֹכֵל בְּשֶׁר אֲבִירִים וְדָם עֲתוּדִים אֲשַׁתֶּה...

*Listen, my nation, as I speak! Israel, as I testify! I am your God!*

*I will not rebuke you for [lack] of sacrifices, as I constantly see your offerings...*

*Even if I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the whole world is mine;*

*Do you think that I consume the flesh of oxen and the blood of rams?*

In these verses the author ridicules those who think that God needs our sacrifices, following the primitive notion of an angry and hungry god who must be appeased.

וְלִרְשָׁעוֹ אָמַר אֱלֹהִים מִה־לָּךְ לְסַפֵּר תִּקְיָ וּתְשֹׂא בְרִיתִי עָלֶיךָ

*To the wicked, Elohim says: "how dare you speak of My laws, mention My covenant [with you]?"*

וְאַתָּה שִׂנְאָתָּ מִוִּסָּר וּתְשַׁלְּךָ דְבָרֵי אֲחֵרֶיךָ

*You have detested rebuke and cast my words behind you!*

אִם־רָאִיתָ גִּנְבַּ וְתָרַץ עִמּוֹ וְעַם מְנַאֲפִים חִלְקָךָ

כִּי־יֵשׁ לְשֹׁחֵט בְּרַעְיָהוּ אִלְשׁוֹנְךָ תִּצְמִיד מִרְמָה

תִּשָּׁב בְּאֵתֶיךָ תִּדְבַּר בְּבוֹאֲמֶךָ תִּתְוֹדֵדֶיךָ...

*If you see a thief, you run with him, and you befriend adulterers,*

*Your mouth delivers evil and your tongue clings to calumny,*

*You badmouth your own brothers, your mother's children...*

דַּמִּיתָ הָיִיתָ־אֲהֵינָה כְּמוֹךָ

*[All that is because] you think I am like you (i.e. a human being who can be bribed and appeased with gifts and offerings.)*

זָכַח תּוֹדָה יִכְבְּדֶנּוּ וְשֵׁם גְּדוֹךָ אֲרָאֵנוּ בְּנִשְׁע אֱלֹהִים

*No! the true sacrifice is showing gratitude for God's blessings, and the way to redemption is to embark on the pathway of God...*

All these verses speak for themselves. We do not have to look dig deep to find that our current system of prayers has fallen into the same dangerous pattern described by our prophets millennia

ago. While it is true that there are many instances in which we feel uplifted and inspired by prayers, it is very hard to achieve that feeling on a daily basis. That feeling, in many cases, is a result of our personal narrative and what we associate with a particular text, place, or situation. I remember driving in Petach Tikva when I heard the news of the terrible helicopters' accident which claimed the lives of 73 soldiers. After the news, they played the song "watch over the world, kid" by David D'aor (תשמור על העולם ילד), which until today, almost 20 years later, I cannot hear without tearing up.

Another important element which makes us feel good about prayers is the sense of community and togetherness, especially when we are experiencing hardships. And finally, we must acknowledge that there is a sense of comfort, familiarity, and accomplishment, in reading the same texts, day after day, in a ritualistic manner.

All this, however, does not absolve us from the need to address the many problems of today's synagogues and prayers: the incessant talking, the feeling of boredom, texts which are not always understandable, even for Hebrew speakers, and the sense of endless repetition. We also face the problem of educating children to pray and the difficult task of having mandatory prayers at school. Did I mention the dissonance between the prayers people utter and the actions they take?

### **Prayer: Practical Solutions**

Prayer is undoubtedly a very important of our life. It gives us hope and resilience, consoles us in hard times, and brings us together in joy and celebration. Over centuries, authors and poets wrote special, individual prayers, as well as poems, some short and clear, others prolonged and complicated in content and meter. Prayers were composed in the spoken languages of each cluster in diaspora, Yiddish, Ladino, Farsi, Tatar, French, Arabic and more. Some of these prayers were written by famous authors, such as Rav Saadya Gaon, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi and Rabbi Shelomo Ibn Gevirol, while the names of others were preserved only through one of the prayers they wrote, such as מודה אני written by the relatively unknown Rabbi Moshe Ben Makhir of 16<sup>th</sup> century Safed. Of the same time and placed we have inherited the exciting and beloved לכה דודי by Rabbi Shelomo Elkavetz, which has become the central axis of the Kabbalat Shabbat services in all traditions. Speaking of Lekha Dodi, if you happen to spend Shabbat near

the Old City of Jerusalem, make sure to be at the Kotel and take part of the new tradition, where participants of all prayer groups join for dancing Kabbalat Shabbat with the many diverse tunes of the Jewish national quilt.

This creativity and diversity is wonderful, but it comes with a price. Sometime prayers whose source was not so pure made their way into the established Siddur. For example, after the surge of the Kabbalah of Safed came the infamous Sabbatean movement. Its followers, many of whom were great scholars, put together a prayer book which gain popularity within a very short time. Even though the authors belonged to a heretical messianic sect, prayer from this book – *המדת ימינו*, still appear in Sephardic siddurim today.

The other problem is that we seem to always add more prayers but never dare to take anything out, and so the siddur becomes a solar system of literary works, the Shema and the Amidah in the center, and many smaller or secondary pieces orbiting it. As a matter of fact, there were many changes in the Siddur which included removal of lengthy prayers, printing them at the end of the Siddur, or printing them in smaller type. A lot of these changes depended not on Halakhic decision but on the availability of printed Siddurim in certain areas. This was the fate of the Aleppo Siddur for the High Holidays, which before the 1500 contained dozens of Piyutim, most of them now extinct.

But these changes usually applied to the secondary parts of the prayer, and not to the ones many observant Jews feel obligated to say every day. The full Sephardic daily prayer, for example, is composed of the following parts:

- The daily blessings, recited individually.
- Reading after putting on Tefillin.
- A Section of the zoahr known as Petihat Eliyahu.
- An anthology of sections from the Troah and Rabbinic sources, meant to fulfil the obligation of studying Torah, and named in short “The Sacrifice” after its final piece.
- Pesuke Dezimra – Chapters of praise and joy, mainly from Psalms.
- The Shema, with two blessing before and one after it.
- The Amidah.

- Viduy – confession and supplications, which is three times longer on Mondays and Thursdays.
- Torah reading on Mondays and Thursdays.
- Ashrei, another psalm, and an anthology of verses known as Kedusha DeSidra.
- Psalms leading to the Shir Shel Yom – The daily psalm which changes every day.
- A Talmudic description of the service of the incense in the Temple – Pittum HaQetoret.
- Alenu LeShabeah.

In between these sections Kaddish is recited between seven and eight times.

This is a lot to be recited every morning. I have seen synagogues where it is done in 35-40 minutes (with some omissions) and others where it takes a little over an hour. In the former there is a sense of a race, or trees being ground to mulch, while in the latter, there is often frustration or very low attendance.

Here are some possible ideas to make Tefila more inspiring and user-friendly. Since it is not easy to change deep-seated practices, and since there is an understandable interest in remaining within the fold of the broader community, I have divided these ideas into three categories. One category deals with changes which can be introduced in synagogues, either by discretion of the leadership or consensus of the congregants. The second deals with changes which an individual can introduce, while still praying daily and traditionally. The third offers solutions to those who feel they cannot follow the traditional path of prayer (except perhaps for special occasions), and would like to know what is the minimum required of them.

### **1. Changes at the Synagogue Level**

- Sephardic synagogues can start by adopting the Ashkenazi practice of reading just the first and last verse of each paragraph, at least during Pesuke DeZimra.
- For those parts where the Hazzan recites the full text out loud, people should be trained to read melodiously and slowly, in a way which allows others to understand the words and to enjoy the rhythm of the Hebrew text.

- The official start point of the Tefila could be the Kaddish before Shema. This way, people can recite Pesuke Dezimra individually, and they will also not be looked down at when coming to the synagogue just before Shema.
- The Amidah will be recited only once, without repetition.
- The Viduy and supplications sections (Tahanun) can be trimmed. One option is to say Tahanun only on Mondays and Thursdays, using the shorter, weekday version. Another option is not to say Tahanun at all, and to rely on other supplications spread throughout the Tefila.
- Translate several sections into the spoken language (in one synagogue, after I have translated the Berikh Shemeh, recited while opening the Ark, a man came to tell me that it is the first time in forty years he understood that prayer).
- In lieu of Dvar Torah, or as part of the sermon on Shabbat, the rabbi can introduce a short thought on Tefila, or read biblical verses or any text which can inspire the listeners.

## 2. Changes at the individual level

In addition to the changes mentioned above, one can individually apply certain changes, even when praying in the synagogue, as long as it is done inconspicuously.

- You can recite the whole Tefila in the language you best understand, without having to read the original Hebrew or Aramaic.

The core unit of Pesuke DeZimra consists of Barukh SheAmar and Yishtabah, with at least one psalm between. You can use psalm 150, which is part of Pesuke Dezimra, or substitute it with the even shorter psalm 117, familiar to us from the Hallel:

הַלְלוּ אֶת־ה' בְּלִי־גוֹיִם, שִׁבְחֵהוּ בְּלִי־הָאֲמִיּוֹת. כִּי גָבַר עָלֵינוּ חַסְדּוֹ, וְאָמַת־ה' לְעוֹלָם הַלְלוּ־יְהוָה.

- If the blessings before and after Shema are too long or difficult for you to say, use this abridged version:

Before the Shema:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלֶכֶּךָ הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ, עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא אֶת־הַפֶּלֶל. הַמְאִיר לְאַרְצֵנוּ וְלְדָרֵינוּ עֲלֵיֶךָ בְּרַחֲמִים, וּבְטוֹבוֹ מְחַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל־יּוֹם תְּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרָאשִׁית. כְּאָמֹר: לַעֲשֵׂה אוֹרִים גְּדוֹלִים, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה',

יוצר המאורות.

אֶהְבֵּת עוֹלָם אֲהַבְתֵּנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מִן בְּלִבְנוּ בֵּינָה לְהַבִּין, לְהַשְׁפִּיל, לְשַׁמֵּעַ, לְלַמֵּד וּלְלַמֵּד, לְשַׁמֵּר וּלְעֲשׂוֹת וּלְקַיֵּם, אֶת־  
כָּל־דְּבָרֵי תִלְמוּד תּוֹרַתְךָ בְּאֵהָבָה. מִהֵרָ וְהִבֵּא עָלֵינוּ בְּרַכָּה וְשְׁלוֹם מִהֵרָה מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ, בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה,  
הַבוֹטֵר בְּעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֵהָבָה.

After the Shema:

יֵצִיב, וְנִכְוֵן הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה עָלֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. אֲמַת שְׂאֵתָהּ הוּא ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵלֵהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וְאֵין לָנוּ עוֹד אֱלֹהִים זוּלָתְךָ, סְלָה.  
וְנֹאמַר: גָּאֲלֵנוּ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת שְׁמוֹ, קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה, גָּאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

- During the week, instead of saying the full Amidah, use this shorter version, which is already mentioned in the Mishnah. This abridged version is called Havinenu, it alludes to all the middle 13 blessings, and is inserted between the first three and the last three blessings of the Amidah (After HaEl HaQadosh and before Modim):

הַבִּינֵנוּ ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ לְדַעַת דְּרָכֶיךָ, וּמוֹל אֶת לִבְבֵנוּ לִירְאָתְךָ. וְתִסְלַח לָנוּ לְהִיּוֹת גְּאוּלִּים, וְרַחֲמֵנוּ מִמַּכְאוֹב, וְדַשְׁנֵנוּ  
בְּנְאוֹת אֶרְצֶךָ. וּנְפֹצוֹתֵינוּ מֵאַרְבַּע תְּקַבֵּץ, וְהַתּוֹעִים עַל דַּעְתְּךָ יִשְׁפֹּטוּ, וְעַל הַרְשָׁעִים תִּגְיֵר יָדְךָ. וְיִשְׁמְחוּ צְדִיקִים בְּבִנְיַן  
עִירְךָ וּבִתְקוּן הַיְכָלְךָ, וּבְצִמְיַסַת קֶרֶן לְדוֹד עֲבָדְךָ, וּבְעֲרִיכַת גֵּר לְבֵן יִשִׁי מִשִׁיחָךָ. טָרֵם גִּקְרָא אַתָּה מַעֲנֵה, בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה  
ה', שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה.

*Translation: God, give us wisdom to understand Your ways, and heal our heart so we can revere You. Forgive us so we can be redeemed, drive us away from ailment, and let us enjoy Your abundance. Gather us from all corners and bring justice to the world. Let the righteous rejoice in the rebuilding of Your city and Temple, and in the redemption delivered by the scion of David. Heed our call even before we cry out, You who are blessed and hears prayers.*

- After the Amidah, recite only the daily psalm and Alenu LeShabeah.

### 3. Just the Bare Minimum

The minimum required is one daily prayer of your choice and your phrasing. You can choose to recite it while putting Tefillin on or at any peaceful moment during the day. You might be able to read some prayers on your daily commute, if you use public transportation, or during a walk in

the park, contemplating nature. The important thing is that your choice of prayer will move and inspire you.

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the different versions see: פסוקי דזמרה, פרופ' דב רפל, כתב עת: שנה בשנה תשנ"ט, 401 – 419

<sup>2</sup> אשל אברהם מבוטשאטש, אורח חיים, סימן נא

<sup>3</sup> רא"ש מסכת ברכות פרק ה

<sup>4</sup> תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כו עמוד ב

<sup>5</sup> פסיקתא דרב כהנא, פיסקא כד - שובה