



Personal Prayer and the Amidah: The Model of Yitzhak

R. Elie Kaunfer – kaunfer@hadar.org

Parashat Hayyei Sarah 5783

How are we meant to pray words that we didn't write? And how are we meant to pray those same words, multiple times a day?

These are classic struggles with a fixed liturgy. But some traditions connected to a line in this week's *parashah* offer some new ways of grappling with this struggle.¹

Genesis 24:63

Yitzhak went out *lasu'ah* in the field before evening...

בראשית כד:סג

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לְפָנוֹת עָרִב...

For now, we will leave the word *lasu'ah* untranslated. In fact, it only comes once in the whole Bible, and so we can't really be sure what it means.² Some options include: meditate (Septuagint),³ plant trees (Rashbam, Hizkuni), or speak with friends (Ramban).⁴

¹ My teacher, Dr. Devora Steinmetz, first taught me about some of these connections, and I am grateful to her for her insights.

² For some options about how to understand this word, see <https://www.thetorah.com/article/what-is-isaac-doing-in-the-field-when-he-encounters-rebecca>. My thanks to Josh Weiner for pointing me to this source.

³ Compare Samson Raphael Hirsch's comments on this pasuk.

⁴ See note 2 and Nahum Sarna, *JPS Commentary on Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), p. 362, n. 23.

But most Rabbinic sources view *lasu'ah* as indicating prayer, specifically the Amidah.⁵ In fact, according to an old tradition, this is the moment that Yitzhak instituted the daily practice of Minḥah, the afternoon service.

Bereishit Rabbah 68:9

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשה סח:ט

Yitzhak established the Amidah of Minḥah, as it says:

יצחק תיקן תפילת מנחה שנ' ויצא יצחק לשוח

"Yitzhak went out *lasu'ah* in the field before evening."

בשדה, ואין שיחה אלא תפילה

And "*siḥah*" - שיחה means: the Amidah.

Because Yitzhak went to pray before evening (לפנות ערב), he is credited with founding the service that is recited before evening, Minḥah. Rabbinic tradition makes this connection between *lasu'ah* and *tefillah*, which in Rabbinic texts usually refers to the official Amidah, through a variety of verses that indicate *siḥah* is a form of prayer. For instance:

Mekhilta VaYehi 2, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, p. 91-92⁶

מכילתא, מסכתא דויהי פרשה ב

"*Siḥah*" means prayer (= the Amidah), as it says:

אין שיחה אלא תפלה שנ'

"Evening and morning and afternoon, I will speak (*asiḥah*) and groan, and God will hear my voice" (Psalm 55:18);

"ערב ובקר וצהרים אשיחה ואהמה וישמע קולי" (תהלים נה:יח)

And it is written: "I will pour out my words (*sihi*) before God, I will tell my troubles before God" (Psalm 142:3);

וכתיב "אשפוך לפניו שיחי צרתי לפניו אגיד" וגו' (תהלים קמב:ג)

And it is written: "A prayer for the poor when he grows faint, and pours out his plea (*siho*) before YHVH (Psalm 102:1)

וכתיב "תפלה לעני כי יעטוף ולפני ה' [ישפוך שיחו]" (תהלים קב:א)

I do not think our rabbis are working out the history of the formulation of the Amidah here.

⁵ The Aramaic Targumim are also uniform on this interpretation.

⁶ See also Bavli Berakhot 26b; Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:1; 7a; Bereishit Rabbah 60:14, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 654-5 and 68:9, pp. 778-9; Mekhilta De-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai 14:10, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 53; Midrash Mishlei 22:28, ed. Vizotsky, pp. 155-156; Tanḥuma Buber Mikeitz 11, p. 98b; Midrash Tehillim 55:2, ed. Buber, p. 146a-b.



After all, elsewhere they attribute the writing of the Amidah to Shimon Ha-Pakuli before Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh (Berakhot 28b).⁷ Rather, they are teaching us something about the character of the Amidah, and specifically that of Minḥah, which is distinct from Shaḥarit, the morning prayer.

We saw that Avraham was credited with establishing Shaḥarit in Parashat VaYera, when he returned in the morning to look out over the destroyed city of Sodom. Morning is a time of clarity, where the world is set before us, and we face our reality, whether or not it intersects with our hopes.

But Minḥah is a time of blurriness and fading light. Yitzḥak is a biblical character who always struggled with seeing and seeing clearly. In fact, in the end of our verse, Yizkhak does not see Rivkah, even though she is before him; he only sees the camels (Rivkah, by contrast, sees Yitzḥak, Genesis 24:64). Later, of course, Yitzḥak cannot see well enough to distinguish between his two sons, Ya'akov and Esav. This inability to see well coincides with the time of Minḥah. How might we also experience the moment of fading light as engendering a different emotional character to our Amidah—even if the words are exactly the same as the morning prayer? We might feel different when the sun is setting; perhaps like Yitzḥak felt before he saw Rivkah, when he continued to suffer from the loss of his mother, and at 40 had no prospects for love.⁸

Why repeat the Amidah multiple times a day? Perhaps the very repetition helps draw our attention to changing feelings throughout the day. Indeed, one explanation of why we say the

⁷ The historical question of how the Amidah came to be is a complicated one. I deal with it in my forthcoming book about the weekday Amidah.

⁸ See Aviva Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), pp. 138-139.



Amidah three times a day was meant to connect us to the changing nature of the day as it progresses.

Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 3:6, 7a

From where do we learn the three Amidot? R. Shmuel bar Nahmani said: The three Amidot correspond to the three times when the day changes for creatures.

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ג:ו, ז טור א

מאיכן למדו שלש תפילות? ר' שמואל בר נחמני אמ' כנגד ג' פעמים שהיום משתנה על הבריות.

We feel differently at first light than we do when dusk comes. The Amidah offers us the opportunity to check in on those feelings, and to pour out our hearts at different emotional points in the day.

But what about our own words? Why recite only a fixed liturgy, when we might have much more to say? Here, too, our verse teaches us something: our rabbis never imagined saying the Amidah entirely as a fixed prayer. Rather, they always saw the Amidah as a base text, to which one also adds personal prayer. The only question was: do we say the personal prayer first, before the fixed words, or after?

Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 7b⁹

It is taught, R. Eliezer says: A person asks for their needs, and then prays [the Amidah]. As it says: “A prayer for the poor when he grows faint, and pours out his plea before YHVH”... And *siḥah* means Amidah, as it says, “Yitzhak went out *lasu'ah* in the field.”

תלמוד בבלי עבודה זרה ז:

דתניא, ר' אליעזר אומר: שואל אדם צרכיו ואחר כך יתפלל, שנאמר: תפלה לעני כי יעטוף ולפני ה' ישפוך שיחו וגו', אין שיחה אלא תפלה, שנאמר: ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה;

⁹ Louis Ginzberg suggested that this might refer specifically to Minḥah, since other Amidot were preceded by the Shema and its associated blessing of redemption. See Ginzberg, *Perushim Ve-Hiddushim Be-Yerushalmi* (New York: JTS, 1941), vol. 3, p. 359.



R. Yehoshua says: A person first prays [the Amidah] and then asks for their needs, as it says: “I will pour out my words before God, I will tell my troubles before God.”
ר' יהושע אומר: יתפלל ואח"כ ישאל צרכיו, שנאמר: אשפוך לפניו שיחי צרתי לפניו אגיד.

R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua disagree about **when** a person gives voice to their personal prayers, by asking for what they need, relative to reciting the fixed text of the Amidah. R. Eliezer says to say one's personal prayers first; R. Yehoshua says to say them afterward. But no one says to ignore personal prayer when saying the Amidah! It is simply a question of where to insert it.

In this version of the teaching, the word *siḥah* is synonymous with fixed prayer, the Amidah. By contrast, other terms, such as “תפלה - *tefillah*” or “להגיד צרה - *le-haggid tzarah*,” indicate personal prayer. This understanding of *siḥah* works with the view that Yitzḥak instituted fixed prayer when he went to pray in the field.¹⁰

However, it is not so clear that *siḥah* means the fixed prayer. In fact, in the Yerushalmi's version of this teaching, the terms are reversed:

Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:4, 8b

Some teach that one prays the Amidah first, and then asks for their needs.

Others teach that one asks for their needs, and then prays the Amidah.

For the one who said one prays the Amidah first, and then asks for their needs:

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ד:ד, ח טור ב

אית תניי: תני מתפלל ואח"כ תובע צרכיו.

ואית תניי תני: תובע צרכיו ואחר כך מתפלל.

מאן דמר מתפלל ואח"כ תובע צרכיו "תפילה לעני כי יעטוף" ואח"כ "ולפני ה'

¹⁰ As Tosafot to Avodah Zarah 7b, s.v. שיחה, and Ritva to Avodah Zarah 7b.



“A prayer for the poor when he grows faint, and pours out his plea before YHVH.”

For the one who said one asks for their needs and then prays the Amidah:

“To hear the cry” and then “and the prayer” (I Kings 8:28)

ישפוך שיחו"

ומאן דמר תובע צרכיו ואח"כ מתפלל

"לשמוע אל הרינה" ואח"כ "אל

התפילה" (מלכים א ח:כח).

In this telling, we have the same debate as above—since surely one must add one’s own personal requests to the fixed Amidah, where does one add them? But the proof texts here in the Yerushalmi view the term *siḥah* or “רינה - *rinah*” as corresponding to the personal, spontaneous request for needs, not the official prayer (i.e. the Amidah), which is represented by the word *tefillah*. With this view of *siḥah* as a personal prayer, Yitzḥak’s behavior takes on another valence. He is not instituting a fixed, public liturgy, the Minhah service. Rather, he is pouring out his personal desires, as the Psalmist does in Psalm 102:1.¹¹

We also can use the Amidah moment as a framework for our own personal prayers. Later, other options emerged for the right place to include these prayers,¹² and we now add them in specific blessings, or following the Amidah. But the main point is: the Amidah was always meant to be intertwined with our own personal requests. Yitzḥak’s moment of personal introspection and pouring out might serve as a model for us as well, looking to pour out our hearts to God—in our own words.

¹¹ Psalm 142:3, which also served as a proof-text for *siḥah* meaning prayer, begins with David alone in the cave—another personal prayer.

¹² See Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 8a

