



Fixed and Spontaneous Words of Prayer

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Parashat Pinchas 5783

Why is there a fixed liturgy to the Amidah? After all, if I am meant to pray to God with focus and intention, shouldn't I use my own personal words, and not words that were written by others long ago?

In Parashat Pinchas, we read of the daily sacrifice that was offered on the altar. Two lambs were offered every day: one in the morning, and one in the evening, before nightfall (Numbers 28:3-4).¹ It did not matter what day it was: whether it was a normal weekday, Shabbat, or Yom Kippur, these lambs were always offered. Indeed, the name of this sacrifice is “*tamid*,” which means: always.

Our rabbis link this sacrifice directly to the daily Amidah:

Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:1, 7b²

The rabbis said: They derived the Amidot from the *tamid* sacrifices. The morning Amidah from the morning *tamid*

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ד:א דף ז טור ב

ורבנא אמרי תפילות מתמידין גמרו תפלת השחר מתמיד של שחר (במדבר כח, ד)

¹ Compare Exodus 29:38-39.

² See also Bavli Berakhot 26b, which links the times of the various Amidot to the times of the *tamid* sacrifices. The third daily Amidah, Arvit, recited at night, is not directly connected to the *tamid* sacrifice (and considered by some early rabbis to be optional). Others link the nighttime Amidah to the burning of the fats and limbs, which lasted throughout the night.



sacrifice: “the first lamb you shall offer in the morning”
(Numbers 28:4), and the Minhah Amidah from the evening
tamid sacrifice: “the second lamb you shall offer in the
evening.”

"את הכבש אחד תעשה בבוקר" תפילת
המנחה מתמיד של בין הערבים (במדבר
כח, ד) "ואת הכבש השני תעשה בין
הערבים".

Once we understand that the Amidah was meant to be viewed in the spirit of the *tamid* sacrifice, we can understand better how the rabbis envisioned the quintessential prayer of Judaism.

First, the *tamid* is offered consistently, no matter what. It does not depend on our personal feelings and whether or not we feel inspired. Rather it is a reliable and predictable offering that happens twice every day. The lambs of the *tamid* sacrifice were, ideally, meant to be identical in appearance and monetary value; the morning lamb should be no different from the evening lamb.³ The Talmud even considers the possibility that people might want to offer both lambs in the morning, or both lambs in the evening. This is why the verse is so specific: to teach us to offer one in the morning, and one in the evening, no more and no less.⁴

³ In Bavli Yoma 62b, the Talmud considers the possibility that there is a requirement for these lambs to be equal in appearance and value (similar to other sacrifices considered there), but ultimately rejects that possibility. Nevertheless, in that *sugya*, one can see the desire for identical sacrificial animals (and is explicitly stated concerning the Musaf sacrifice), even if one that is not ultimately enforced.

⁴ Yerushalmi Pesahim 5:1. See also Sifrei Bemidbar #142, ed. Kahana, p. 477.

This model of prayer is one in which we are called to pray consistently, without variety in our offerings to God, which now take the form of words of prayer instead of lambs.⁵ It expresses the ongoing and everlasting connection with God, that will not dissipate or waver.⁶

Why was the *tamid* sacrifice offered at these particular times of day? The Talmud teaches that the sacrifice was done **opposite** the position of the sun. In the morning, when the sun was rising in the east, the offering was made on the northwest corner of the altar. In the evening, when the sun was setting in the west, the offering was made on the northeast corner of the altar.⁷ What was the reason for offering the sacrifice opposite the sun? To draw people away from the temptation to worship the sun, especially at its transitional moments (sunrise and sunset).

Torah Temimah to Numbers 28, n. 10⁸

The entire point and purpose of the *tamid* sacrifices was to draw the hearts [of the Jewish people] away from worshipping the sun... Therefore the reason that the morning *tamid* is sacrificed on the western corner (of the altar) and the evening *tamid* is sacrificed on the eastern corner was so that they would turn away from the day, that is: they would turn their

תורה תמימה במדבר כח הערה י

שכל ענין ותכלית התמידין היה כדי להמשיך את הלבבות מעבודת השמש... לכן כונת המצוה לשחוט את התמיד של שחר על קרן מערבית ושל בין הערבים על קרן מזרחית, דבאופן כזה פונים כנגד היום, כלומר שפונים

⁵ See Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 24:19, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 377, interpreting Hosea 14:3: “R. Abahu said: Who will pay the lambs that we used to offer before You? Our lips—through the Amidah that we pray before You.” Indeed the Baal Ha-Turim, in his comment to Ex. 29:39, understands the word האחד, describing the morning lamb offering, to refer directly to the Amidah, because it has a numerical value of 18 (the original number of blessings in the weekday Amidah). Some versions of Numbers 28:4, including the Samaritan text, read האחד instead of אחד. See Menahem Kahana, Sifrei Bemidbar (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015), vol. 4, p. 1177, n. 43.

⁶ One can understand the trauma that must have accompanied the interruption of the daily *tamid* sacrifice, which was singled out as one of the tragedies that befell the Jewish people on the 17th of Tammuz (Mishnah Ta’anit 4:6).

⁷ Mishnah Tamid 4:1; Bavli Tamid 31b. Compare Mishnah Sukkah 5:4. In Sifrei Bemidbar #142 (ed. Kahana, p. 476), the reverse is stated: the morning *tamid* was sacrificed in the eastern part of the altar, and the evening in the western part. See on this different tradition Kahana, Sifrei Bemidbar, vol. 4, pp. 1179-1180.

⁸ See also Malbim to Numbers 28:3.



backs on the sun. In this way the desire to worship the sun
would be weakened.

עורף לשמש, ובזה יחלש כח האמונה
בעבודת השמש.

In this understanding, we are called twice a day to reject the temptation of idolatry, and thus to literally turn our backs on the sun. Critically, the *tamid* sacrifice is a public sacrifice, not an individual offering.⁹ It expresses a national struggle that is ongoing. Worshiping the sun was a problem for the entire Jewish people, and was addressed as such.¹⁰ Similarly, the fixed words of the Amidah liturgy represent the national issues that the Jewish people is—or ought to be—focused on. Its content is not meant to be determined by individual needs or circumstances.¹¹

And yet, the fixed liturgy was never the entire story with Jewish prayer. Starting from the time of the Mishnah, we are warned that fixed words are no substitute for *tahanunim*, i.e. individual supplications.

Mishnah Berakhot 4:4¹²

משנה ברכות ד:ד

R. Eliezer says: One who makes his Amidah fixed, his
Amidah is not supplications.

רבי אליעזר אומר: העושה תפלתו קבע אין
תפלתו תחנונים.

⁹ See R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch to Numbers 28:4.

¹⁰ See Mishnah Sukkah 5:4 and the debate in Tosefta Berakhot 6:6, ed. Lieberman, p. 34, about whether to make a blessing upon seeing the heavenly bodies. Ha-Amek Davar comments (Exodus 29:39) that the temptation was not only to worship the sun, but to attribute one's financial success or failure to the cycle of the sun. The *tamid* and its location was meant to underscore that God is more powerful than the sun.

¹¹ Indeed, Ezra Fleischer has persuasively argued that the blessings of the Amidah only express national issues, not personal prayers (despite previous interpretations of the prayer that assign the first 6 requests to individual needs). See Ezra Fleischer, "Tefilkat Shmoneh Esreih," *Tarbiz* 62 (1993), pp. 197-199. Fleischer notes that the first blessings are the current needs of the nation, and the second part is connected to the future final collective redemption. "There is no blessing that relates to individual needs." (p. 198). See also Leon Liebreich, "The Intermediate Benedictions of the Amidah," *JQR* 42 (1951-52), p. 424: "[T]hose benedictions which at first sight appear to reflect private or personal needs, are in reality expressive of public or national needs."

¹² See also R. Shimon ben Netanel's statement in Avot 2:13.



The fixed liturgy is the required portion, meant to mirror the national daily sacrifice; but the Amidah must also contain moments of specific personal prayers. Indeed, while the early rabbis debate where exactly to add in these personal prayers (before, after, or in the middle of the Amidah are options), all of them understand that people should give voice to personal needs in the context of the fixed liturgy.¹³ In the words of one Amora:

Yerushalmi Berakhot 4:4; 8a¹⁴

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ד:ד, דף ח טור א

R. Aḥa said in the name of R. Yose:¹⁵ One must innovate רבי אחא בשם רבי יוסי צריך לחדש בה דבר בכל
something new in [the Amidah] every day. יום.

How does this dynamic of integrating fixed and personal prayers play out? For certain needs we are meant to add personal prayers in the context of specific blessings, such as the one for healing or income.¹⁶ But most of these personal prayers are reserved for the end of the Amidah, in the service we know as Tahanun (literally: supplications). Although today there are (ironically) fixed words for this service, originally it was an open container, where people were meant to recite their own personal prayers.

¹³ See B Avodah Zarah 7b-8a. On this point, see my previous essay on Parashat Hayyei Sarah, “Personal Prayer and the Amidah,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/personal-prayer-and-amidah>.

¹⁴ Compare Rabbah and Rav Yosef’s opinion in Bavli Berakhot 29b. There R. Zera says he wishes he could innovate within the Amidah, but is afraid lest he become distracted, presumably from reciting the fixed words.

¹⁵ “R. Yose” without qualification in the Yerushalmi normally refers to R. Yose bar Zavda. This Amora is a student of R. Aḥa; it is therefore impossible for R. Aḥa to be citing his student here. This R. Yose must be a mistake for either Rav Yosef (to whom this opinion is attributed in the Bavli; see previous note) or R. Asi, one of R. Aḥa’s teachers, commonly known in the Yerushalmi as “R. Yasa,” or sometimes “R. Yose.” My thanks to Jeremy Tabick for clarification on this point.

¹⁶ Bavli Avodah Zarah 8a. See also my essay on BeHa’alotkha, “Praying for Healing—Urgently,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/praying-healing-urgently>.



Orhot Hayyim, Hilkhhot Tefillah, p. 45¹⁷

After the morning and afternoon Amidah, one falls on one's face and prays whatever supplications they desire.

ארחות חיים הלכות תפילה, עמוד מה

אחר התפלה בשחרית ובמנחה נופל על פניו ומתפלל בכל התחנונים שירצה.

The Talmud reports numerous personal prayers recited by various rabbis following the Amidah, modeling this aspect of prayer.¹⁸

The *tamid* sacrifice helps us understand the nature of the Amidah, but it is only part of the picture. Jewish prayer generally, and the Amidah specifically, is an intertwining of these two elements: fixed liturgy (*keva*) and personal prayers (*tahanunim*).¹⁹ One without the other leaves our prayer life incomplete. If we never recited fixed words, we would not have the experience of sharing national needs, hopes, and aspirations in prayer. And if we never recited our own personal prayers, we would deny ourselves the opportunity to speak directly from our heart based on our own specific circumstances. The full experience of Jewish prayer is the combination of the regular, unwavering, consistent offering with the personal, varied, and specific prayers of our heart.

¹⁷ The *Orhot Hayyim* was a legal collection by R. Aharon ben Ya'akov ha-Kohen, 13th-14th century Spain and Provence. See also Rambam *Mishneh Torah Hilkhhot Tefillah* 5:13.

¹⁸ See Bavli *Berakhot* 16b-17a; Yerushalmi *Berakhot* 4:1;7d.

¹⁹ See R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 350. Many people contrast the terms *keva* (fixed liturgy) and *kavanah* (intention), as if fixed liturgy cannot be invested with true intention. I do not find this contrast particularly helpful or accurate. One can (and must) have *kavanah* for the fixed words of liturgy, even as one certainly has *kavanah* for one's own personal prayers. *Kavanah* ideally infuses both types of prayer. For more on *kavanah* in prayer, see my essay on Parashat Yitro, "Struggling to Pray With Intention," available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/struggling-pray-intention>.