



CONGREGATION ANSHEI ISRAEL

THE HEART OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM IN TUCSON CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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Affiliated with
The United Synagogue
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Fact:

Myth:

One needs to know Hebrew to pray in a Conservative synagogue.

According to Jewish law, prayer can be offered in any language. We use Hebrew to link ourselves with all Jews and to develop an emotional attachment to our people and our God. (Our prayerbook includes translations and transliterations.)

The following is taken from Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, endorsed by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, The Rabbinical Assembly and The Jewish Theological Seminary. To purchase the complete text, visit www.uscj.org/booksvs, the USCJ's Web site. Copies are \$4.

TEFILLAH (PRAYER)

We translate *tefillah* as “prayer,” but the English word denotes petition, and the Jewish experience of *tefillah*, while it includes petition, is much richer than that. It includes acknowledgment of God’s role in our lives, praise of God, confession, return to God (*teshuvah*), thanksgiving, the enunciation of ideals for both the Jewish people and the world, and study of our sacred literature from the Bible to this day. As the Hebrew root of *tefillah* suggests, its emphasis is not on petition, but rather on self-examination as a prelude to self-improvement.

One who sees the world as pervaded by God responds to that with *tefillah* on many occasions throughout each day. The synagogue and special seasons or events can be catalysts for prayer, but only in the soul of one who is ready to seek God.

Keva and Kavvanah

The Jewish tradition establishes a structure, called *keva*, for the times, content, and order of prayer. Thus, Jewish law requires that we pray at fixed times to assure our continual awareness of God and of Jewish tradition. Moreover, *keva* enables us to pray as a community; only by coordinating the times and content of prayer can we pray together. Setting a fixed time for prayer adds meaning to life by marking its special moments and endowing it with a rhythmic pattern.

Nevertheless, the ideal goes beyond *keva* and calls upon us to pray with *kavvanah*, intending and feeling our prayers. In their attempts to make prayer live for contemporary people, Conservative congregations will differ in their services, and, for that matter, a given congregation may vary the form of its worship from time to time or offer alternative services. All of these variations are part of the Jewish tradition of liturgical creativity. The *Siddur*, the traditional prayerbook, evolved over time through both addition and deletion. This creative process enabled the Jew to mix the traditional with the modern and thus to pray with more *kavvanah*. The prayerbooks and other liturgical publications of the Conservative community embody this balance between old and new, *keva* and *kavvanah*.

While there are minimum, fixed times for prayer each day, a Jew is encouraged to pray at any time he or she is moved to pray, either within or outside the usual rubric of prayer. When one is unable to perform the prescribed ritual, as part of a community (*minyan*), one should recite the prayers in private. Even communal forms of prayer begin with the individual soul of every Jew.

The Spiritual Meanings of Prayer

The many types of prayer — petition, confession, thanksgiving, praise of God, emotional expression, affirmation of ideals, and study of Torah — make it possible for every Jew to gain spiritual meaning from prayer to differing extents and in any of the following ways:

a. *Perspective, appreciation and meaning.* The many praises of God in the liturgy may seem redundant; but focusing our attention on God and His qualities enables us to transcend ourselves, to see the world from God’s perspective, as it were, that our concern may extend to people beyond ourselves, and that we may appreciate values which transcend our own needs and wants. Above all, the goal of prayer is to involve us with a sense of the holiness of God, which fills the universe.

b. *Communal and historical roots.* Our inescapable egocentrism presents yet another problem: we are separate and lonely. To be psychologically healthy, we must form our own individual personalities, but we must also create ties to others. Jewish liturgy helps us transcend our loneliness by indicating a preference for worshipping with a community (*minyan*), by the constant use of the first person plural in the Prayerbook, and by the repeated references to the Jewish people of the past, present, and future. All these factors together help produce a powerful sense of community and rootedness.

c. *Knowledge of the tradition.* Sometimes prayer is effective because it teaches us about our heritage. Judaism regards study as one of the highest forms of worship. This is apparent in the communal reading of the Torah, together with its exposition and discussion. Learning Torah, one reenacts the hearing and acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

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The *Siddur* itself is a book of theology for the Jewish people as a whole, and Jewish prayer, then, is nothing less than a continual renewal of one's attachment to the heart and mind of Judaism.

d. *Esthetic and emotional impact.* We Jews strive to make our experience of prayer beautiful (*hiddur mitzvah*).

In addition to the sheer beauty of the synagogue and service, worship can enable us to express our feelings and hopes. Prayer is a potent way to express our present emotions and feel new ones.

e. *Moral effects.* The set times for prayer remind us of our moral commitments, with the result that we are more likely to make them a part of our lives. Prayer can stimulate us to act as we should. It can help us to become holy like God: "You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

f. *Fulfilling a Mitzvah — Prayer as a Discipline.* There are times when one is not in the mood to pray. Jewish law obligates us to pray nevertheless. This requires discipline and a sense of obligation, but it may ultimately lead us to pray with attention and feeling.

g. *The efficacy of prayer — God as the hearer of our prayers.* For the worshiper, prayer can be a vibrant link to God and the Jewish people. People understand this link differently. Some believe that even communal prayer remains a personal expression of the individual worshiper, albeit one heightened in its meaning by an awareness of oneself, one's people, and God. Others believe that prayer is a form of direct communication with God. That view is probably more personal and comforting, but it raises the difficult issues of the efficacy of prayer. Can God, and does God, answer our prayers? How do we know? Sometimes our prayers are answered because we become transformed in the process and thus our goal is achieved. This is true of collective as well as individual prayer. Thus, centuries of Jewish prayer for the restoration of Zion, which kept alive the hope of return in the hearts of our people, found its fulfillment in the rebirth of the State of Israel. But, however we understand the phenomenon of prayer, much of its significance lies in its ability to give voice to our yearnings and aspirations, to refine our natures, and to create a strong link to God.

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The Language and Music of Prayer

According to Jewish law, one's obligation to pray can be fulfilled in any language. Nevertheless, Conservative Jews, like Jews throughout the centuries, pray largely in Hebrew. Religion employs intellectually abstract and emotionally powerful terms to convey its message. Such terms, when translated, tend to change both in denotation and connotation. Hence we pray in Hebrew to preserve all the original nuances of meaning. Hebrew has always been the primary language of Jewish worship *leshon ha-kodesh* (the holy tongue). As a result, through Hebrew prayer we link ourselves to Jews praying in all times and places. One who learns the *Siddur* and its music develops an emotional attachment to the very sounds and rhythms of the words and music.

For all of these reasons, the Conservative movement urges contemporary Jews to master the art of traditional Jewish prayer, including its Hebrew words and its music. A variety of educational programs within the movement seek to help people learn the necessary skills so that they can participate in the largely Hebrew prayers of Conservative synagogues. At the same time, as Jews have done throughout time, we in the Conservative movement enhance Jewish liturgy and the experience of worship through new prayers in both Hebrew and the vernacular and through the use of new melodies. We thus avail ourselves of the legitimacy, immediacy, and creativity of prayer in our native tongue and we "sing a new song" while preserving the many values of singing the Hebrew prayers and melodies hallowed by our tradition.

A Life Imbued and Inspired by Prayer

The Conservative movement also teaches that there are prayers and special blessings (*berakhot*) which are to be said in a variety of circumstances, both within the synagogue and without, and encourages Jews to recite them at the appropriate times. Thus we become sensitive to each occasion and learn how to respond to it. By offering thanks to God we remind ourselves that neither food nor drink nor any phenomenon of nature, indeed the gift of life itself, is to be taken for granted. The prayers that mark the milestones of the life-cycle and the Sabbaths and Festivals, endow these occasions with high significance. In this way, prayer expands our awareness of God beyond limited times and places and imparts a sacred dimension to our lives as a whole.

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