Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum: Blessings & Gratitude

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A Project of the Aleph Society
Near a small village in Eastern Europe some 200 years ago, a young Jewish shepherd boy was orphaned and was adopted by some warm-hearted Gentiles. The boy, who knew he was Jewish but had no understanding of what this meant, would go out each day with the flock and with his flute.

As the Jewish Holidays neared he saw many people traveling on the road going to the nearby city of Berdichev. Their presence aroused the boy’s curiosity.

As he sat out in the field playing his flute and watching the grazing flock, he felt a desire to go the synagogue in Berdichev for Yom Kippur. Alas, he did not know how to pray. He did not even know how to read Hebrew. What could he do?

Meanwhile, in the small town of Berdichev, in Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s synagogue, the congregation was deep in prayer. The holy tzaddik, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, was not happy. He sensed that the prayers of the congregation were not making their way into the heavens. He tried, but in vain, to elevate the prayers.

At this time, the young boy, who had decided to come to Berdichev, entered the synagogue. He was totally amazed at the sight of the townsfolk engaged in prayer. In their devoted concentration, they did not notice the young lad enter the synagogue.

The young boy felt unhappy. Each person in the synagogue was able to commune with God but not him. He felt an urge to do something, but what could he do? He could not read Hebrew, he knew no prayer. With streams of tears, he decided to play a tune to God. Unknown to him, playing music on this—the holiest day of the year—was forbidden. He pulled out his flute and in sincere concentration dedicated a soul-searching tune to God. As he began his melody, the entire synagogue turned in anger to look at this terrible desecration of the holiday. As they shouted at him to stop this terrible desecration, the boy looked terrified. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak came running to the boy, smiling and joyous.

“Ah,” he laughed, “know that this boy’s innocent mistake has saved our prayers. I saw that our prayers were not ascending to the heavens. We were not able to pray with purity and sincerity. Suddenly, this boy with his unknowing error but pure heart and tears began to play his flute. His purity was added to our prayers and the doors of heaven opened up and our prayers were accepted.

“We owe our thanks to this young man.” He said to the boy, “You shall sit with me, for you have saved our prayers.”

(Credit: adapted from Simcha Rich, Jewish Magazine)
Discuss this story:

1. Is it better to pray by reading the words in a prayer book, or by spontaneously talking to God?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of both of those models of prayer?
3. What do you think Jewish tradition has to say about this topic?

Some points to mention if they don’t:

- Jewish tradition seems quite fond of set prayer since we have so many set prayers, from full prayer services to blessings for specific occasions. It doesn’t seem to leave a lot of room for individual creativity.
- Set prayer may feel more authentic, may be easier for those who don’t know what to say, may be more appropriate—maybe people will say the “wrong” thing if they pray spontaneously.
- Set prayer also can be seen as a way to unify the Jewish people. There is something powerful about the idea that all Jews everywhere are saying the same words.
- Many people would be overwhelmed without words to pray and then perhaps would not pray at all.
- On the other hand, a set formula has potential to make prayer less spontaneous and genuine. What if you have to say something you disagree with? What if you have a genuine feeling that you’d like to express?

There is this preconceived notion that fixed prayer is somehow empty, that perhaps we are saying words that we don’t really mean. Today, we’re going to unravel that stereotype and explore why both fixed and personal prayer can have meaning.

Background to Our Sugya (Talmudic Passage) (19 minutes)

Introduction (2 minutes)

The Talmudic passages we’ll explore today are based on the text of the first blessing of the Amidah, the silent prayer at the center of any prayer service. It uses this phrase from Deuteronomy when it talks about God. Let’s take a look at the first blessing in the Amidah prayer.

Text #1: The first blessing of the Amidah prayer (2 minutes)

The first blessing of the Amidah prayer

... the great, mighty, and awesome God, God most high, who bestows acts of loving-kindness and creates all

The Source for this blessing, Deuteronomy 10:17

For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, mighty and awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe.
With regard to additions to prayers formulated by the Sages, The Gemara relates that a particular individual descended before the ark as prayer leader in the presence of Rabbi Hanina. He extended his prayer and said: God, the great, mighty, awesome, powerful, mighty, awe-inspiring, strong, fearless, steadfast and honored.

Rabbi Hanina waited for him until he completed his prayer. When he finished, Rabbi Hanina asked him: Have you concluded all of the praises of your Master? Why do I need all of this superfluous praise? Even these three praises that we recite, The great, mighty and awesome, had Moses our teacher not said them in the Torah and had the members of the Great Assembly not come and incorporated them into the Amida prayer, we would not be permitted to recite them. And you went on and recited all of these. It is comparable to a king who possessed many thousands of golden dinars, yet they were praising him for silver ones. Isn’t that deprecatory? All of the praises we could possibly lavish upon the Lord are nothing but a few silver dinars relative to many thousands of gold dinars. Reciting a litany of praise does not enhance God’s honor.

Tangentially, the Gemara cites an additional statement by Rabbi Hanina concerning principles of faith. And Rabbi Hanina said: Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven. Man has free will to serve God or not, as it is stated: “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all of His ways, to love Him and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 10:12). The Lord asks man to perform these matters because ultimately, the choice is his hands.

The verse says: What does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear the Lord your God. The Gemara asks: Is fear of Heaven a minor matter that it can be presented as if God is not asking anything significant? Didn’t Rabbi Hanina say in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: The Holy One, Blessed be He, has nothing in his treasury other than a treasure of fear of Heaven, as it is stated: “Fear of the Lord is his treasure” (Isaiah 33:6). The Lord values and treasures fear of Heaven over all else.

The Gemara responds: Indeed, for Moses fear of Heaven is a minor matter. As Rabbi Hanina stated: It is comparable to one who is asked for a large vessel and he has one, it seems to him like a small vessel because he owns it. However, one who is asked for just a small vessel and he does not have one, it seems to him like a large vessel. Therefore, Moses could say: What does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear, because in his eyes it was a minor matter.
Discuss:

1. We know from our first source that in the *Amidah* we refer to God as “great, mighty and awesome.” Why, then, is the chazzan (prayer leader) adding all of these adjectives when he talks about God? “God, the great, mighty, awesome, powerful, mighty, awe-inspiring, strong, fearless, steadfast and honored.”
2. Do you think it is a good thing or bad thing for the chazzan to improvise in prayer? Why?

Continue with the rest of the first paragraph, and discuss further:

3. What is the problem here? We seem to be implying that this is all of God’s praise? Why can’t we add to standardized prayer?

We will continue to discuss this issue for the rest of the class, so no need to answer these questions now.

Continue with the second paragraph:

4. What is the connection to the first paragraph? What is the point?

On the surface, the connection is that both statements are made by Rabbi Hanina. But there seems to be an additional connection—notice how both paragraphs contain central images of a king’s treasury. In the first paragraph, it is the metaphorical king whose treasury contains gold coins. In the second paragraph it is the King of Kings (the one who the metaphor represented), whose treasury contains fear of heaven.

Perhaps these two images should be read in light of each other. The chazzan in the first part was wrong because he did not properly describe the contents of the king’s storehouse. In the second part, we learn what the contents of the king’s storehouse actually are: fear of heaven. In other words, the chazzan in the first part thought he was acting out of fear of heaven, but in fact he was not. According to that reading, the chazzan would perhaps be guilty of false piety, of misunderstanding what it means to fear God.

Counterpoint to Our Sugya: Source #3 (12 minutes)

One thing that makes this story all the more difficult to understand is the fact that another story exists in the Talmud that also deals with the issue of making changes to the phrase הָאָל מָונָל הָגוֹיֶר הָבָרוֹר הָבָרוֹר. The background to this source is that Jeremiah and Daniel both used phrases that sound quite similar to the Torah’s (here described as Moshe’s) phrase הָאָל מָונָל הָגוֹיֶר הָבָרוֹר the great, mighty, and awesome God.

ירפינו לה: הָאָל מָונָל הָגוֹיֶר הָבָרוֹר הָבָרוֹר

Jeremiah (32:18): God, the great and mighty, Lord of Hosts is His name

Daniel (9:4): God great and awesome
Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi stated: Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? Because they returned the crown to its original state. [How so?]

Moshe referred to [God as] “the Great, the Mighty, the Awesome.” Jeremiah came and said, “Strangers are ravaging His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness?” He therefore omitted the phrase, “the Awesome.”

Daniel said, “Strangers are enslaving His children; where is His might?” He therefore omitted the phrase, “the mighty.”

Then came the Men of the Great Assembly. They claimed, “To the contrary: this is the strength of His might, that He can subdue His inclination and award clemency to those who are evil, and this is His awesomeness, for without the Divine awe, how could one nation survive while enveloped by nations that are hostile and violent?”

But how could those sages (Jeremiah and Daniel) have done so? Rabbi Elazar said: because they know that the Holy One, Blessed be He, insists on truth, therefore they could not falsify before him.

In this section, Jeremiah and Daniel make changes to the formula but this time the changes are subtractions, not additions! Jeremiah and Daniel feel that omitting words is a more honest reflection of their relationship to God at that time. And the Talmud’s response is basically acceptance. The Men of the Great Assembly find a way to still allow us to say the words that Jeremiah and Daniel left out, but their points stand. And at the end, the Talmud defends them: they were being honest and not hypocritical.

Discuss:

1. How can we possibly resolve these two Talmudic passages with each other?

2. In the first passage, a man at prayer adds more praise to the phrase and he is criticized for it. In the second, men at prayer subtract from God’s praises, and their actions are defended. What is going on?

3. Is there a reason that subtracting from the description of God’s glory might actually be better than adding?

Some solutions to propose if they don’t:

> Perhaps it is the personal greatness of Jeremiah and Daniel that allow them to alter the text. Perhaps an anonymous chazzan cannot take the liberty to change the text of the Amida.

> Perhaps there is a difference between changing the text when one is the prayer leader versus when one is praying individually.

> Both texts are about being honest. In the first one, the chazzan is making a big show of piety he doesn’t actually have. In the second one, both Jeremiah and Daniel refuse to not be true to themselves.
I found it written in the name of the Ra’ah that even though silence is preferable towards Heaven, that refers to listing praises of God Himself, such as great, mighty, awesome and brave, since we lack understanding to list His praises. But to tell God’s wonders and miracles and mighty deeds, anyone who adds is praiseworthy; that is the entire book of psalms and praises!

Perhaps we’re offering a compromise. The real problem is the excessive use of adjectives, which may be construed as false flattery. We shouldn’t be providing our own adjectives. We most certainly can describe God’s great acts, as we see in the Book of Psalms.

Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz: The Thirteen Petalled Rose


If a person has a fleeting thought of love or fear of God, and he takes that thought and sings it, repeats it again and again until he makes it a rhapsody, a tapestry, then he has turned an initial spark into a fervent flame. The power in this way of prayer lies in continuity. We engage in the work of prayer by taking a topic and working on it—not at random, not by happenstance, but together with the prayer-guiding the prayer in a specific direction over a period of time, whether that be an hour, a week, or a month. Within that time frame and within those words of prayer, this topic is woven into the words of prayer, and it not only touches but is carved into one’s soul. Slowly, as truth is carved free of illusion—that which is permanent is carved from that which is transitory—one no longer has simply a single point of emotion and fervor, but a line that leads one from one rung to the next on the ladder of prayer.

Discuss:

1. What is the value in repetition?
2. Can you think of something in your life that has improved after you’ve done it many times (a sport or a skill perhaps)? Can that same parallel be drawn with the repetition of prayer?
Conclusion (5 minutes)

At the heart of this last solution is the difference between flattery and gratitude. Heaping adjectives upon adjectives is not, either with God or with humans, the appropriate way to express gratitude—it just ends up coming off as sycophantic. The way to express gratitude, on the other hand, is by thanking God—or a human to whom you are grateful—for specific actions: by describing their actions that were good to you, and by describing the effect that those actions have on you.

This distinction also explains why the first chazzan who adds is criticized, while the prophets who subtracted were praised. Both of those cases are about avoiding flattery—in the first, adding many new adjectives is flattery, and in the second, saying even the adjectives that may be said, if you personally did not believe them, would also be just empty flattery.

Actual gratitude, on the other hand, is never a problem. In fact, specific personal expressions of gratitude appear all over Masekhet Berakhot. Let’s end this class with one example of truly expressing gratitude.

Text #6: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 28b

MISHNA In addition to the halakhot relating to the fixed prayers, the Gemara relates: Rabbi Nehunya ben Hakana would recite a brief prayer upon his entrance into the study hall and upon his exit. They said to him: The study hall is not a dangerous place that would warrant a prayer when entering and exiting, so what room is there for this prayer? He said to them: Upon my entrance, I pray that no mishap will transpire caused by me in the study hall. And upon my exit, I give thanks for my portion.

Again, we have an individual who innovates a prayer and is questioned about it. But his defense is that he is giving thanks for the ability to learn Torah. And therein lies the truth: there can never be too much gratitude.
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Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 33b

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Text #4: Beit Yosef, Orach Hayyim chapter 113

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