

Aspects of Judaism



Jewish Prayer

"O Faithful One, may Your
tender mercies
Reach Your son who loves You greatly.
In deepest longings has he sought
To gaze upon Your mighty splendour.
My God, my heart's delight,
Come quickly; be not hidden.

Reveal Yourself, my Dearest;
spread over me
The shelter of Your peace.
Your presence lighting up the world,
We shall rejoice, exult in You.
Hurry, my Beloved, time has come,
Grant me Your grace
As You did of old.

(by Eliezer Azikri, a 16th century mystic
and scholar who lived in Safed, in the
Galilee. This poetry is sung in some syna-
gogues on Friday night, before the com-
ing of the Sabbath.)

The oldest Jewish prayers are to be found in
the Bible. From psalms and mystical devo-
tion to the simple expressions of ordinary

men and women, Jewish prayer has been
created over thousands of years.

Brief prayers are recited at home before and
after meals, on sabbaths and festivals, in
times of joy and times of sorrow, but for most
religious Jews prayer is associated above all
with community, and men, women and chil-
dren go to synagogue at least on sabbaths and
festivals. Daily prayers are offered in syna-
gogues every morning and evening, but usu-
ally only a small minority of worshippers
attend.

The Synagogue

When we come into a synagogue our eye is
drawn to a curtained alcove at the front.
Behind the curtain are the doors of the Holy
Ark which contains handwritten scrolls of
the Five Books of Moses. The scrolls are the
synagogue's most precious possession; cov-
ered by velvet mantles they often have silver
adornments. The ark is approached via sev-
eral steps and a low dais. An ornate lamp
hangs from the ceiling above the dais in
remembrance of the light that burned per-
petually in the Jerusalem Temple. In the body
of the synagogue rows of seats separated by

aisles give way to a raised platform in the centre. A solid desk on the platform is covered by a mantle and the scrolls rest upon it when they are read publicly. The floor is usually carpeted. There are no images, statues or visual representations.



In orthodox synagogues men and women sit separately; in reform and liberal synagogues they are together. The men wear skull-caps, some of which might be brightly coloured. They wrap themselves in wool or silken prayer shawls and one notices the tassels and fringes of the shawls, especially if the men rock backwards and forwards as they pray. This ancient practice aids concentration and gives prayer a physical expression; more poetically, it reflects the human soul flickering like the flame of a candle.

Prayers are chanted or sung and today people often prefer communal singing to the musical formality that used to be a feature of the major Anglo-Jewish synagogues.

The Amida

Prayers are said in synagogue morning, afternoon and evening. The service gradually leads the worshippers deeper into the presence of God. Psalms and contemplation precede the focal point of the liturgy when the community stands and each person quietly recites a series of blessings known as the Amida – a Hebrew word for "standing". The blessings are written in the plain language of ordinary people:

"Forgive us Our Father, for we have sinned:
pardon us, our King,
for we have transgressed;
Blessed are You, O Lord who is gracious
and forgiving.
Restore to us our Judges and our Counsel-
ors and remove from us grief
and suffering.
Blessed are You, O Lord, who loves right-
eousness and justice."

The Shema & Blessings

The Shema (Hebrew for "Hear") is the nearest the synagogue comes to a statement of its creed.

For Jews, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One" is the best known of all Biblical statements and even those who rarely attend synagogue will probably be able to identify it. The Shema is said morning and evening; it is the first prayer learned by Jewish children and the last utterance of pious people as they take leave of the world. Each word of the verse is to be uttered slowly and with devotion and men, women and children place their hands over their eyes as they recite it..

The Shema is always accompanied by blessings; in the evening, these reflect upon the presence of God in the setting of the sun and the coming of the night. As worshippers contemplate the wonder of the heavenly order, awe gives way to an intimate expression of Divine love for the people of Israel. The congregation respond with the credal proclamation of God's absolute unity and quietly recite the verses that follow.



The Shema and its blessings assume a simple faith, but for many modern Jews religious life is fraught with conflict. Living in a secular world, they feel that the language of tradition does not express their greatest concerns, and they do not share its most deeply felt aspirations. The Jewish people live in the aftermath of the Holocaust, when God's presence was mysterious and utterly beyond understanding. There is a great tension between the covenantal certainties of the prayer book and the historical experience of the twentieth century. But, in contemplating those dark and terrible days, Jews have come to know how precious are the gifts of ordinary life. In family and community they find an intuition of a sacred love that is unspoken but ever present and even in the depths one is not alone:

"O Lord, Spread over us the tabernacle of Thy Peace and remove also the adversary from before us and behind us. Shelter us beneath the shadow of Thy wings, for Thou, O God, art our guardian and our deliverer and guard our going out and our coming in, unto life and unto peace from this time forth and for evermore. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who guardest for ever Thy people Israel."



The Jewish Sabbath

The Jewish Sabbath commences about half an hour before sunset on Friday afternoon and concludes when the stars are visible in the night sky on Saturday.

Even in non-traditional homes Friday night is a time when people come together and relax at the end of the working week. On Friday afternoon the Sabbath meals are prepared and the dining table covered with a white cloth and formally set. Two loaves, reminiscent of the double portion of Biblical manna, are placed on the table with a bottle of wine and a goblet. The loaves are covered by a second cloth which is often delicately embroidered. Candlesticks complete the setting and candles are lit, usually by the woman of the house, just before the onset of Sabbath. Candle lighting is accompanied by a brief blessing and sometimes a quiet personal prayer. Everyone then goes to the synagogue for the Friday evening service, which takes about 45 minutes.

When they have returned home, parents bless their children and family and guests then take their places at the table. An ancient tradition has it that houses are visited by angels on Friday night and a simple song of greeting asks their blessing and bids them farewell.

Making Kiddush

One person then fills the wine goblet and verbally sanctifies the Sabbath day (This act is known as "making Kiddush" from the Hebrew for "sacred" which is "Kadosh"). He raises the goblet and chants the brief liturgy.

"The heavens and the earth were complete and all of their hosts. On the seventh day

God completed the work that He had made and He rested on the seventh day from all of His work. And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on this day He rested from all of the work that He had created"

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, creator of the fruit of the vine. Blessed are You, Lord our God, who has sanctified us with His commandments and given us His holy Sabbath in love as a remembrance of the work of creation. You chose us from all of the peoples and sanctified us, You have given us as a heritage Your holy Sabbath in love and in favour: Blessed are You O Lord, who sanctifies the Sabbath."

He then drinks from the goblet and pours wine for everyone around the table.

When Kiddush is complete everyone repairs to the kitchen where hands are ceremonially washed: water is poured on each hand separately and a blessing is recited as they are dried. When all present have returned to the table the blessing for bread is recited.

"Blessed are You O Lord, who brings forth bread from the earth."

Whoever made the blessing eats and divides the loaves among the company.



The Meal

Everyone relaxes and the meal begins. The menu is a matter of choice. Chicken soup, chopped liver and other delicacies were much favoured, but today, many people are either vegetarian or more aware of cholesterol, so cuisine is varied accordingly.

In traditional households Sabbath songs, called zemirot, are sung between the courses. The atmosphere is warm, spontaneous and informal: children are encouraged to play their full part. Friday nights vary: some homes are filled with conversation while for others the ambience is quieter and somewhat contemplative.

25 Hours of Tranquility

For the whole of the Sabbath observant Orthodox Jews do no creative work. Cars, televisions, telephones and fax machines are left behind and the traffic jams and rush hours are forgotten for 25 hours of tranquility. Shops and businesses close, money disappears for the day, pockets are emptied and even small change is put away. If people go out they walk to their destination. They do not carry anything from their houses into the public domain, so achieving the greatest distance from the daily transactions of consumer society. All cooking is done in advance and food is left on a covered stove for the three meals that are taken on Friday night and the following day. Many homes have installed a catering urn to supply hot water and lights are either left on or time-switched according to requirements.

Reform and Liberal Jews are less concerned with punctilious observance and prefer to emphasise the ideals of the Sabbath and its inner spirituality. For orthodoxy the ideals are inseparable from the practicalities.

The underlying principle is that the physical resources of the world are sacred. While we are permitted to use them for our needs, we have a weekly reminder of their ultimate nature and we see the world as it was in the beginning of time. All of the tasks of life are means to an end which is the fulfilment of the will of our Creator. Status and acquisition have no ultimate significance: the end of life is the attainment of a personal holiness in all of our activities and relationships.



The essence of Shabbat is encapsulated in an Eastern European prayer recited by women on Friday evening, after candle-lighting:

"O God of Your people Israel:
 You are holy
 And You have made the Sabbath and the
 people of Israel holy.
 You have called upon us to honour the
 Sabbath with light,
 With joy
 And with peace -
 As a king and queen give love to one
 another;
 As a bride and bridegroom -
 So we have kindled these two lights for
 love of your daughter,
 The Sabbath day.
 Almighty God,
 Grant me and all my loved ones
 A chance to truly rest on this Sabbath day.
 May the light of the candles drive out
 from among us
 The spirit of anger, the spirit of harm.
 Send Your blessings to my children,
 That they may walk in the ways of Your

Torah, Your light.
 May You ever be their God
 And mine, O Lord,
 My Creator and my Redeemer. Amen.

Questions for discussion

1. How does the Jewish sabbath differ from the Christian Sunday?
2. What are the major features of Jewish prayer?
3. How important is the home in Jewish tradition?

Suggested further reading

For a light introduction: Lionel Blue's two books "**To Heaven with Scribes and Pharisees**" (DLT 1975) and "**A Backdoor to Heaven.**" (DLT 1979).

For more solid fare: Alan Unterman, "**Jews: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices**" (C. Routledge and Kegan Paul 1981).

For GCSE work: C. M. Pilkington: "**Judaism: An approach for G.C.S.E.**" (Hodder and Stoughton 1991).

This leaflet has been prepared by the Committee for Catholic – Jewish Relations as part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The Committee is grateful to the Reverend Jonathan Gorsky, Education Officer of the Council of Christians and Jews, for this contribution.

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

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