

AVODAH: THE PATH OF PRAYER

The world rests on three things: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut hesed*: the study of Torah, worship, and deeds of loving-kindness. [*Ethics of Our Ancestors* 1:2]

A *vodah* is commonly understood as worship. It is often referred to as *avodah she-be-leiv*, the “worship of the heart.” Yet for many people, whether they grew up practicing Judaism or are coming to it for the first time, prayer is often the most difficult ritual. While Shabbat has an innate appeal as a day of rest, and holiday customs can be fun, prayer confronts us with questions: Why pray? What do we believe about God? Can God hear and answer our prayers? If we don’t believe in God, is there any reason to pray? Why are we saying a fixed liturgy rather than spontaneous prayers? These questions are often particularly difficult because we have been raised in a secular world with its skeptical stance. Even Jews who attend services regularly may struggle with these questions.

For many Jews, attending synagogue services is an act of communal solidarity. Going to synagogue on Shabbat is the “best” way to identify with the Jewish community. Talking over *kiddush* with others who make up your Jewish community, people you probably don’t see during the week, is a crucial part of the synagogue experience for Jews. Without denying that aspect of the experience, the question remains, especially for those standing on the outside and wondering whether to come in, what is prayer all about?

In different periods of Jewish history, other questions have been posed. In the past, the notion of a God who could hear and answer prayer was not “unbelievable.” But for those who believed in a God who could answer prayers, questions arose about what was inappropriate to ask from God. The ancient rabbis, for example, developed a notion of “praying in vain,” which basically meant praying to ask God to miraculously change something that had already happened. Thus, while it was perfectly appropriate and possibly efficacious to pray for the gender of a baby before conception, it was a “prayer in vain” to beseech that the gender of the baby should change once it had been established. The belief in prayer’s potential to change the future as well as its limitations on changing the already existing present raised a number of philosophical questions for traditional theologians. How can God know the future if our prayer can change it? (To answer that God knows we will pray only begs the question.) If God is omnipotent, why couldn’t God change the sex of a baby?

Sometimes the concerns go deeper. Can prayer change anything? Is there a Being who can hear our prayers and respond to them? Isn’t it kind of cheesy to ask for things from God, to pray for a new bike or a red sports car for Hanukkah? If most people only pray when they are in the proverbial foxhole, isn’t prayer just wishful thinking seeking some magical way to get out of a dire circumstance?

While the question of what is God will be dealt with more fully in the last chapter of this book, it is useful to speak of God either as immanent or transcendent. To say that God is transcendent means that God is a Being that is separate from us. Many traditional views of God posit a transcendent God. These range from the traditional notion of a transcendent God who rewards and punishes to a Being or Force that acts in a caring fashion in the universe. To say that God is immanent means that God is inside us rather than separate from us. If God is the good inside us, then the Godliness inside us can act in a caring fashion.

Some recent studies suggest that ill people who have a group of people praying on their behalf do better physically than ill people who don’t. The web of the universe is complex. Cause and effect may not explain everything. It may well be that having people express good

wishes/prayers on our behalf can affect the cosmos and us in ways that we cannot yet clearly understand. This possibility of making a difference for the good can be called God. Whether God is the caring impulse inherent in every human being or God is a Being or Force that can act in a caring manner when called upon, the universe responds to our actions—including our prayers.

There are still prayers that are in vain. God, as it were, always answers, but sometimes the answer is no. But prayer and the response it calls forth are part of the “physics” of our spiritual universe—to every action of prayer there is a reaction.

Kinds of Jewish Prayer

It is important to understand that prayer was never just about asking for things. *Bakasha*, “asking for things,” is only a minor element in the totality of Jewish liturgy. In fact, on Shabbat, prayers of *bakasha* are removed from the liturgy, since Shabbat is meant to be a day of rest and contemplation, not of worry about what you do not have. In weekday services, the liturgy consists of three types of prayer: *shevah* (praise), *bakasha* (asking), and *hoda'ah* (gratitude). It is customary to view the progression of liturgy as reflecting the progress of a person approaching a king with a request. First you would praise the king, then make your request, and finally express your gratitude. This metaphor of God as king is explicit in Jewish liturgy and the most common way of referring to God. Earthly court protocol may have influenced much of the overall structure of the liturgy, as well as specific customs such as bowing.

In general, praise rather than request is the dominant theme of Jewish liturgy. Praising God can bring us to a recognition of our human finiteness in comparison to God. It makes us aware that the world does not end and begin with ourselves. When we praise God as the creator of the world we also remember that God has given us the gift of all the wonders of creation. Most especially, we can remember that God has given us the most precious gift of all—the gift of life. Finally, engaging in the act of prayer reminds us that despite our limitations and foibles,

God desires to be in relationship with us. Prayer can help lead the worshiper to move beyond the self to a sense of standing before the presence of the Holy One. The metaphor of a kingly court is not the only one possible in this understanding. Praise can lead to prayer as the experience of the Divine Presence, however that Presence is imaged or experienced. This awareness then leads to a thankfulness for the experience of God's Presence, the feeling of being cared for or loved by God, and an increased appreciation for the blessings of our lives.

Yet the purpose of prayer is not totally encapsulated by an explanation of these three types of prayer. For the mystics, prayer had the capacity to move the worshiper beyond praise, request, or thankfulness to a literal experience of the Divine. For Hasidism in the eighteenth century, prayer was the central religious path, often replacing the traditional notion of Torah study as the primary path of the religious Jew. Hasidism saw prayer as the means to achieve the goal of religious life: *devekut*, “cleaving to God.”

Another approach to prayer is based on a typology of Jewish mysticism that posits the existence of four worlds that bridge from the materiality of this world to the spirituality of the Godhead. (This typology is in part an attempt to answer how an infinite spiritual being, God, could have created a finite material world.) This approach, as set forth in contemporary language by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, sees the morning liturgy as a progression from the material to the spiritual. We begin with the morning blessings that focus on the body and continue with the psalms that give voice to the world of emotions. We continue with the Shema, which states the principle of God's oneness, reflecting the world of the intellect. Finally, we come to the *amidah*, during which we stand before the Presence, striving to enter the world of spirituality.

The act of prayer itself and its forms can be understood to have a variety of purposes, each of which can be found in the traditional liturgy, and some of which move beyond that liturgy to the contemplation of God. Different schools of Jewish thought emphasized different aspects of the prayer experience. Eventually, Jewish tradition favored fixed liturgy over spontaneous prayer, and communal prayer in a *minyán*, “quorum of ten,” over individual prayer.

The Prayer Services

Since before talmudic times, Jews have been called upon to pray three times a day. These services are *shaharit* (morning), *minhah* (afternoon), and *ma'ariv* (evening, though Jews of Sephardic origin call the evening service *arvit*). On Shabbat and festivals an extra service called *musaf* ("additional") is added to the morning prayers.

Yet the origins of the liturgy are not clear. It is striking that despite being "one of the pillars of the world," prayer is not one of the *mitzvot* in the Torah. Most rabbinic authorities believe prayer is only a rabbinic *mitzvah*. Why?

Perhaps it is because *avodah* originally referred to the sacrificial system rather than to prayer. In fact, some Bible scholars question whether there was any liturgy accompanying the sacrifices in the First Temple. Whatever prayers we do have in the biblical text are simply the spontaneous prayers of individuals, such as Moses' prayer to heal Miriam, his sister. It would seem that the Torah sets out in detail the rituals related to bringing sacrifices and has apparently no notion of liturgy.

Liturgy as we know it seems to come about only during the late Second Temple period, in the last century before the common era. Even the rabbinic texts, which generally like to maintain the antiquity of the forms of rabbinic Judaism, acknowledge the late development of Jewish liturgy. For example the Talmud tells us that one sage, Shimon ha-Pekuli, set in order the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, the *amidah*. The significance of prayer was accelerated by the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., which eliminated sacrifices as a manner of divine worship. The rabbis explicitly designed the daily liturgy as a substitution for sacrifices. Synagogues, which had coexisted with the Second Temple in its last years, now became the focus of public religious life. The rabbis of the Talmud established all the basic elements of the service, though Jewish liturgy would continue to grow in an unabated process from their time to ours.

In the Talmud there is a discussion concerning the origin of the services. One opinion held that the prayers paralleled the sacrifices in the Temple. There were daily morning and afternoon sacrifices as well as an additional sacrifice on Shabbat and holidays. Since there were no

daily nighttime sacrifices, the evening prayer service originally had a status different from the other services—it was not obligatory. The other opinion held that the patriarchs instituted the three daily services. Abraham instituted the morning service, Isaac the afternoon, and Jacob the evening. In this schema there is no character that introduces *musaf*, the additional service. While the Talmud likes to place the origin of Jewish liturgy back in the historic past, one still wonders how the Talmud understood this tradition. For after all, it tells us that saintly Abraham did not pray the afternoon or evening services. One also wonders what prayers the patriarchs might have uttered, since, as we have seen, it is only in talmudic times that the *amidah* was composed. Perhaps the talmudic tradition is meant to suggest that the impulse to pray has always existed and beginning with the patriarchs there was a regularity to the expression of prayer even if the words of prayer were still fluid.

Fixed Liturgy

The coexistent strands of fixed and fluid liturgy continued for some time in liturgical practice. Even as the rabbis of the Talmud formulated the *amidah*, using the traditional *berakhah* formula (see "Eating and Food," pp. 66–93), the specific wording of the liturgy remained for the most part fluid. This was due in large part to the lack of prayer books in the pre-Gutenberg world. Thus even as the rabbis created and set the theme of a particular *berakhah*, they left the wording up to the person leading services. Since most people did not have the text of the liturgy in front of them, they would listen to the leader composing the *berakhah* on its requisite theme and then answer *Amen*, "So be it." The liturgy was much shorter than it is today. Over time the liturgy became ever more fixed. The services became longer, especially the morning service and those of festivals. Yet creativity and the introduction of new liturgy continued for over a thousand years after the talmudic period. From the end of the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century, however, little new material was added. In the twentieth century there was a contraction of the liturgy, even in traditional circles. (The rejection of many of the additions to the standard liturgy is an exception to the trend

toward stringency in many Orthodox circles.) However, today in all the liberal movements there have been both changes and deletions of traditional liturgy as well as the addition of new liturgy.

Even as the liturgy became more and more fixed, the tradition remained concerned that the tension between *keva* and *kavanah* be maintained. *Keva* is the “fixed” liturgy; *kavanah* is the “intention” of the worshiper. In the last chapter, I discussed the rabbinic debate about whether fulfilling a *mitzvah* requires intention. This is a particular problem with regard to prayer. While in the end *kavanah* is not required, it is still very much desired, especially when it comes to prayer. After all, what is the point of praying if you are paying no attention to the words and their meaning!

If *kavanah* is so important, why is Jewish prayer so focused on a fixed liturgy that tells you what to say and when to say it? After all, isn't spontaneous prayer by its very nature a prayer with *kavanah*? On one level the answer may lie with the broad trend within the tradition to set out ever more specifically what needs to be done to fulfill the *mitzvot*. If it is a *mitzvah* to pray, then what do I need to say to fulfill my obligation? Yet there may also be an insight into the nature of prayer that is operative here. It is clear that a fixed liturgy runs the risk of a rote recital of the prayers. Yet however appealing spontaneous prayer may be, the tradition is concerned that without a regular prayer practice we will never come to spontaneous prayer or come to it only very rarely. There is an art to prayer. It is not something that comes easily, even to those who have no doubts about the existence of God. It is a practice like any other. It needs to be done on a regular basis if we are to become skilled at it, just as learning to play an instrument requires frequent rather than spontaneous practice, and physical exercise needs to be done on an ongoing and regular basis to obtain the health benefits. If prayer is not part of a regular practice, it will end up on the list that many of us keep: the things we want to do that we somehow never seem to get around to doing.

Prayer, then, is a practice that requires just that—practice. It does not work very well if you pray only once in a while. It may not work very well if you pray only once a week on Shabbat. Yet the more frequently we pray the more we run the risk of prayer becoming a rote ritual. You

have probably seen people who are “speed daveners,” those who say the words at the speed of light while checking their watch for the time and waving hello to an acquaintance who has just entered the room. How to avoid prayer as rote?

Reconceiving Prayer

One place to begin is to reconceive of prayer as a discipline rather than an obligation. Prayer as obligation can lead too easily to speed-davening just to get it done. Prayer as discipline acknowledges that there will be times when the act of prayer has no real meaning to the worshiper. Yet it is still important to pray in order to maintain the discipline of prayer. The difference, then, is that you have not fulfilled an obligation in this rote prayer. You understand that this act of prayer was unsuccessful, but it is important to keep on praying to increase your prayer skills. It also lays the groundwork for the future potential of your prayer experience. Being unsuccessful is a goad to try harder next time rather than being satisfied with having fulfilled the *mitzvah* in a system that sees prayer as an obligation.

Another element in creating a vibrant prayer life is to reacquire the ability to pray in our own words. While there are some places in the traditional liturgy that allow for personal prayers, basically Jewish liturgy has become fixed and formal. A number of years ago, a group from my synagogue met a few times a year with a group from a church. We ate together and then engaged in a Black-Jewish dialogue. At our first meeting, before we ate, the minister offered a prayer that spoke about the coming together of diverse communities to talk with each other. All I could think of doing was saying the *motzi*, the traditional blessing over bread. I had never “made up” a prayer. Or similarly, at a conference about religion and healing, a nun gave examples of prayers she said with ill patients. They were beautiful and also reflected the particular circumstance of the patient. The rabbi on the same panel spoke about two traditional prayers for healing which are formulaic and therefore do not reflect the patient's particular circumstance, e.g., he is about to be operated on or she just received a bad prognosis. The paucity of our tradition was striking. We limit the outpouring of our

hearts when we feel bound to use only the fixed liturgy. Told to put aside our prayer books and just speak from the heart, most of us feel embarrassed and tongue-tied. Along with the treasures and tradition of our liturgy we need to add our own words if prayer is to become a practice rather than an obligation.

How to Pray

There is a particular style to Jewish prayer that is derived from Hannah. Hannah (whose story is found at the beginning of the First Book of Samuel) is childless and she goes to the sanctuary to pray for a child.

R. Hammuna said: How many important rulings may be derived from the verses about Hannah at prayer (1 Sam. 1:10ff). "Now Hannah, she spoke with her heart"—hence, they who say the *Tefillah* must direct their full hearts to the prayer; "only her lips moved"—hence, they who say the *Tefillah* are to do it clearly with their lips; "but her voice could not be heard"—hence it is forbidden to raise one's voice in the *Tefillah*. . . . [Talmud, *Berakhot* 31A]

The traditional style of prayer then is to articulate the words, not to say or read them silently. The words should be said loudly enough so the worshiper can hear them but not so loudly as to disturb the person next to you. The "silent" *amidah* is not really silent at all; rather it is said to oneself, in distinction to when the *amidah* is chanted out loud by the person leading services.

It is ironic that the basic style of Jewish prayer should be modeled on the practice of a woman, Hannah, and yet, according to traditional *halakhah*, women are not obligated to observe the *mitzvah* of prayer, which also means that they cannot lead services!

Another part of the style of Jewish prayer, often practiced, is shuckling. This refers to moving the upper body back and forth during prayer. The origin of the practice is uncertain, but it is commonly associated with Eastern European Jewry. Both articulating the words and moving back and forth provide a physical dimension to the act of prayer.

Making Prayer a Daily Practice

The three daily services create a framework for the creation of a daily practice of prayer. Upon rising in the morning, prayer can be both a way to give thanks for the new day and a spiritual preparation for that day. Similarly, praying at the end of the day can be a thanksgiving for the blessings of the day just past as well as an opportunity for a reflection upon the experience of the day. It can also serve as a way to come to a calm place, making the transition to sleep easier. *Minhah*, the afternoon prayer, is less obvious in its purpose. It is not tied to any natural phenomenon such as sunrise and sunset. It is the shortest service of the day, since it lacks the Shema and its blessings. Each service then has its own character.

Shaharit: a morning practice The challenge of *shaharit* is that it is the longest daily service and yet for many this is the most pressured time of the day. How much time you have to devote to a *shaharit* will naturally affect how many prayers you can say. You will also need to weigh how much of the traditional liturgy you want to include as well as being aware of what are the central elements of the traditional liturgy.

Some models:

1. In the "Dawning" chapter (pp. 3–21), several prayers are mentioned that are said on waking up, each of which takes less than a minute. This is all some people will have time for.
2. In that chapter we discussed the *birkhot ha-shahar*, the morning blessings that can serve as a morning liturgy. This first part of the service contains many of the elements of the rest of the service in concise form. Blessings, the Shema, Torah study are all found in the first few pages of the prayer book. This then could serve as a basis for a *shaharit* of five to ten minutes.
3. You can find a verse, a phrase, a psalm, or a song that speaks to you and that becomes your mantra repeated over and over for your *shaharit*.
4. You can do an abbreviated version of the traditional liturgy, such as Psalm 145 (*ashrei*), a short version of the blessings before and after

the Shema including the Shema and its first paragraph, the *amidah*, or a shortened version thereof. (A traditional version of an abbreviated *amidah* can be found in *Siddur Sim Shalom*, edited by Jules Harlow [Rabbinical Assembly, 1985], pp. 228–31.) Conclude with *aleinu* or some other closing liturgy. This would take approximately fifteen minutes.

There is another factor to take into account. You may want to give yourself some time to make the transition into prayer. It is not easy just to jump in without any “warm-up.” This could consist of sitting in silence, singing a *nigun* (a wordless melody), chanting, studying, or reciting some liturgy. (Part of the reason that *shaharit* service is so long is that a preliminary section was added as preparation, but then over time that “preparation” became part of the core of the service. Then a new preliminary service was added and served its function until it too became part of the core, etc.) Similarly, you might not want to rush immediately away, rather you might want to sit in your devotional mood, letting it sink in before going off to the hustle and bustle of the day. This would add to the “length” of your prayer service.

A very nice collection of Jewish prayers, including nonstandard ones, is *A Language of Faith*, edited by Nahum Glatzer (Schocken, 1947).

Minhah The challenge of *minhah* is to carve out some time in the middle of the day. The traditional liturgy could be said in ten minutes, so it is not so much a question of length as it is of stopping work in order to pray. Yet it would seem that the busier our workday and the faster the pace of our lives, the more beneficial would be a break, not for coffee or a snack but to breathe. Or to reflect on the questions: Who are we and who do we want to be? Perhaps then the Shema is not recited in *minhah* because it is too much to ask amid the business of the day to come to a sense of God’s Oneness and thus the Divine unity that underlies the world. The fragmented nature of our work—forty-five-minute meetings, production deadlines, multiple memos, various clients or patients—seems to point in the opposite direction. *Minhah* then asks only for a pause to reflect, to remember what is important and what is ultimately extraneous—to return to our real selves, who

want to be caring and helpful to others even as much as we want to succeed and earn a living.

The challenge of *minhah* is to find what will allow us to do that. What liturgy will bring us back to clearer awareness? Where can we go for a few minutes of uninterrupted time? Our office? Outdoors? The bathroom?

Ma’ariv The evening service has both the Shema and *amidah* but is still much shorter than *shaharit*, since it lacks the morning service’s preliminary psalms. The traditional liturgy could be said in fifteen minutes. Or, as with the other services, you can construct your own *ma’ariv* with or without elements of the traditional service. You may want to directly connect it with going to bed (see “The End of the Day,” pp. 94–102). Like *shaharit*, the evening service includes the theme of the transition from light to darkness. It also includes a request that we lie down in peace as our day draws to a close. If, in the morning, we are awakening to and preparing for the new day, then in *ma’ariv*, even as we reflect back on the day, we are bringing ourselves to a place of calm and peace in order to have a restful sleep.

Prayer Practices

Whether one is meditating or praying the traditional liturgy, it can be helpful to the experience to have a set place at home for your spiritual practice. Ideally, this would be a space set aside for it; at least it should have some visible decoration to help create a devotional atmosphere. Even if it is simply a chair that you also use for reading or watching TV, coming to the same place for your daily prayer practice at home can still help in creating a prayerful experience.

There is a tradition of using wall plaques as a devotional focus. One form is a *mizrah*, from the word meaning “east.” Since the tradition is to face east toward Jerusalem while praying, such a plaque reminds us which is the correct way to face. Another form is a *shiviti* plaque, whose name is taken from the first word of the verse “I have placed God before me always” (Psalm. 16:8). A centerpiece of the *shiviti* is the

name of God. Both kinds of plaques are often artistically rendered, sometimes in paper-cuts (there are examples at the beginning of each part in this book). Today they are found in some traditional synagogues, and they may also be adopted as a devotional focus at home.

The garments of prayer also can be a devotional aid. They are discussed toward the end of this chapter.

Praying in a *Minyan*

Jewish prayer classically takes place in a *minyan*, a quorum of ten or more Jews. Despite prayer's being an intensely personal experience, we do it in a group. This communal setting is emphasized by the fact that almost all of the prayers use plural forms rather than singular. Perhaps to be able to pray we need to move beyond the walls of our self. An awareness of the others around us can lead to an awareness both of the Other and of our shared humanity. In the presence of others we are more likely to acknowledge our shortcomings as human beings. Likewise, in the presence of others we are enabled to move beyond disappointment in or condemnation of our self to an outpouring of the heart that longs for a change.

Thus, praying in a *minyan* serves as a setting for our own prayer. Sometimes this can be literally true. We have all been in services that have seemed rote or uninspired, or in which we cannot keep up with the pace of the prayers being recited. Or sometimes our mood seems at variance with that of the community; for example, they are joyous and celebratory and we are contemplative or even sad. In these cases, the service can become the setting for our own prayer. We do not need to be always on the same page literally or emotionally with the congregation. Having a group of people praying in the background can help create a prayerful environment. We can join again with the congregation at the central prayers such as the Shema or when they are singing (it is hard to pray when others are singing) or when we are ready. No matter how uninspired the service may seem to us, our own experience is very much in our hands.

Prayer as a Way of Being

As mentioned, it is striking that prayer is not a *mitzvah* according to most rabbinic authorities. One could say that there is no *mitzvah* to pray because none is necessary, prayer is a natural impulse. Or because prayer is beyond the system of *mitzvot*, it is not something to be done only at specific times and with specific words. Rather, prayer is a way of being.

How many Tefillahs is one required to utter every day? Our masters taught: One is to utter no more than the three Tefillahs which the fathers of the world ordained. David came and specified the times: "Evening, morn, and noon" (Psalm 55:18). Hence, one is not permitted to utter more than three Tefillahs a day. However, R. Yohanan said: Oh that one could continue to pray the entire day! [*Midrash Tanhuma, Mi-ketz, 9; Talmud, Berakhot 31A*]

"As for me, let my prayer be unto You, O Lord, in an acceptable time." For everything the Holy One set a time and a season, as is said, "There is a time for experience" (Eccles. 8:6)—except for prayer. Whenever people pray, they are answered. Why is there no set time for prayer? Were a person to know the time when, if they pray, they will be answered, they would leave off other times and pray only then. Accordingly, the Holy One said: For this reason I do not let you know when you will be answered, so that you will be willing to pray at all times, as is said, "Put your trust in God at all times" (Psalm 62:9). [*Aggadah Bereishit 77*]

To live a prayerful life is to live a life of devotion. It is to carry with you an attitude toward the unfolding of your life. To always be praying is to live with an awareness of the true reality of nature.

"For prayer is not the shutting of one's eyes to reality. It is the glimmer, the intimation, the daring which leads to the transcending of reality" (Jakob Petuchowski). Prayer leads us to an understanding of our limitations and our frailty as well as our capacity for goodness and greatness. As we pray, we become aware of all that lies beyond the self,

of the mountains and valleys of the psalmist, of the play of light and dark in the daily cycle of our world, of the birds and all the other creatures singing praise to God, and finally of all of creation. As we achieve the correct perspective of being only a small dot in a vast universe, we can feel alone. Moments of prayer in our busy lives become opportunities for self-reflection. Most often when we do that, when we gaze in the mirror of truth, not only do we see that we are only an insignificant dot in the universe, but the countenance staring back at us is an ugly one. We see all the bruises and warts on our faces earned in our lives. It is the portrait of Dorian Gray that we see rather than the prettified self we like to think we present to the outside world. Some commentators understand the word for prayer, *mitpalel*, with its reflexive grammatical form, to mean "judge oneself." Prayer prevents us from being carried away with ourselves. Yet even as we gain true perspective and a truer sense of ourselves, we are not meant to berate ourselves for our failures. Nor are we meant to feel insignificant or that in the scope of the universe whatever we do or whatever happens to us is insignificant. Nor is the goal to achieve an equanimity that leads you to feel nothing matters. Nor to come to a realization that all life is just a passing breath, as in the imagery of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes. For as small and as fallible as we are, as we encounter God in prayer we are reminded that we are created in the image of God. This means that each person is unique and each of us is called to act in Godly, that is, holy, ways.

The Hasidic master Isaacher Baer of Zlochow taught on Gen. 44:18 the following. At first, when a person wishes to pray, he thinks of God's greatness and says to himself: "Who am I, a mere flawed mortal to pray before the great and exalted God." But upon further reflection, he realizes that there is no place absent of God and therefore he too is part of the Divine. We are all created in the Divine image. With this understanding the person will now be able to pray with great enthusiasm.

Prayer becomes the expression of and evidence for our relationship to God. It is an affirmation that we are never alone, we always stand in relationship to the Holy One, who loves us with an everlasting love.

Prayer reminds us that God the Creator is everywhere in the universe, including, most importantly, in ourselves. To live a prayerful life is to see the image of God in every person we see, to see the every-

day blessings of a blue sky and a green tree. In fact, it is to see the many blessings of our lives even as we don't ignore the curses and the suffering that is inevitably our fate.

Standing on an empty beach, we look back across the sand stretching as far as the eye can see. Lost from our sight is not what lies beyond the horizon, but rather the millions of grains of sand lying at our feet. All those millions make up this sandy vista, but we only perceive the mass whole. A life of prayer is to make us aware of the millions of moments that together make up the sandy beach of our individual lives. As small as each of us is in the vista of the universe, as fleeting as this moment is, this moment and myself are integral parts of the tapestry of existence. The challenge of prayer is even harder than we think. It is not only to pray three times a day in a *minyán*, it is to be prayerful at every moment of the day. To know before Whom you stand, and to act and react to the world in a holy way.

If prayer is pure and untainted, surely that holy breath that rises from your lips will join with the breath of heaven that is always flowing into you from above. Thus our masters have taught the verse: "Every breath shall praise God": with every single breath that you breathe, God is praised. As the breath leaves you, it ascends to God, and then it returns to you from above. Thus that part of God which is within you is reunited with its source. [From the Hasidic work *Keter Shem Tov*, as adapted in *Your Word Is Fire*, by Arthur Green and Barry Holtz]

A KAVANAH FOR PRAYER

Teach me my God, a blessing, a prayer
 On the mystery of a withered leaf
 On ripened fruit so fair
 On the freedom to see, to sense,
 To breathe, to know, to hope, to despair.
 Teach my lips a blessing, a hymn of praise
 As each morning and night

You renew Your days,
Lest my days be as the one before
Lest routine set my ways.

[Leah Goldberg, translated by Pnina Peli]

A Brief Guide to Jewish Liturgy

There are a number of components in Jewish liturgy. Broadly they fall into three categories.

1. Prayers from the Bible. Most of these are from the Book of Psalms. In addition, the best-known piece of Jewish liturgy, the Shema prayer, is composed of three selections from the Torah.

2. Prayers composed by the rabbis of the Talmud. The *amidah*, the central prayer of every Jewish service, was composed in the rabbinic period. The Talmudic rabbis employed the form of the *berakhah*, the blessing, which is an essential element in the liturgy. The final wording of the rabbinic liturgy was only established in the early Middle Ages.

3. Beginning in the rabbinic period and continuing until the end of the Middle Ages, liturgical poetry was composed and added to the services. Known as *piyyut* (plural: *piyyutim*), these poems often developed around themes from the festival cycle. Thousands were written. Some were adopted only by a local community, though certain of them became widely accepted as standard parts of the liturgy. This was especially true of the expansion of the High Holiday liturgy, where some of our most famous prayers are *piyyutim*, for example, the *u-netanah tokef* prayer. In the modern period, with the printing of the prayer book and the increased standardization of the liturgy, *piyyutim* that were used only locally mainly disappeared, and in general *piyyut* was de-emphasized, since the poetry was often difficult to understand.

The berakhah The talmudic rabbis inherited the basic *berakhah* formula. A *berakhah* for the rabbis needed to include the words *barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam*, "Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of the universe." There are a number of types of *berakhot*. (1) There are short forms said before eating, such as the bless-

ing over bread, which begins with the *berakhah* formula and continues *ha-motzi lehem min ha-aretz*, "who brings forth bread from the earth" (see the chapter "Eating and Food," pp. 66–93, for further examples). (2) A short form said before doing a *mitzvah*. It adds the following to the opening formula: *asher kidshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu*, "who has made us holy through the commandments and commanded us." This is followed by reference to the particular *mitzvah*, such as lighting the Hanukkah candles. (3) The long form of a *berakhah*, which is usually the length of a paragraph but which can occasionally be longer. This form is a key underlying structure in Jewish liturgy. The long-form *berakhot* begin with the opening formula *barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam* and continue by setting out a theme. One example is the *berakhah* at the beginning of the evening service, which talks about God as the bringer of light and darkness and night and day and celebrates God and God's creation. This long-form *berakhah* then concludes with part of the *berakhah* formula, *barukh atah Adonai*, "Praised are You, Eternal One," followed by a few words that recapitulate the theme of this liturgical unit. Thus this long form is framed by parts of the basic *berakhah* formula. These long-form *berakhot* were the basic building blocks of rabbinic liturgy. Thus, the evening service is composed of two such *berakhot* preceding the Shema, two following the Shema, and then the *amidah*. The *amidah* itself is a series of such paragraph *berakhot*, each one on a different theme. The *amidah* is also known as the *shemoneh esreh*, literally "eighteen," which was the number of blessings that made up this prayer group. (Later, a nineteenth was added, but the name had become traditional by that time and was not altered.)

Recognizing the formula *barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam*, followed after some lines of liturgy by the formula *barukh atah Adonai*, alerts you to the beginning and the end of a unit of liturgy. There is one complication. When there is a series of blessings that make up a larger liturgical unit, the opening *berakhah* formula is not repeated each time but rather is "assumed," though the concluding *berakhah* formula is always present. Thus only the first *berakhah* preceding the Shema opens with the *berakhah* formula. The second *berakhah* opens with the words *ahavat olam*, "with eternal love,"

though it does conclude with the concluding blessing formula of *barukh atah Adonai*, with the summary of the theme of this second *berakhah*, that is, *ohav amo yisrael*, "who loves God's people Israel." This is similarly true of the *amidah*, where only the first blessing opens with the *berakhah* formula, the rest beginning with their themes but including the concluding *berakhah* formula.

An additional word on the amidah The *amidah* is the central prayer of Jewish liturgy. Every "service" contains an *amidah*. The *amidah* begins with three blessings of praise and concludes with three blessings of thankfulness. The middle section changes according to the occasion. During the week the middle consists of thirteen blessings of request that range from healing or wisdom to a restoration of the people to the land of Israel. On Shabbat and festivals, the middle section consists of a single blessing on the theme of the day. (The Rosh ha-Shanah *musaf* is exceptional in having three central blessings for a total of nine overall.) The *musaf* service is an additional *amidah* said on Shabbat and festivals.

Traditionally, when there is a *minyan*, the *amidah* is said silently and then repeated aloud by the service leader in every service except for the evening service. (This difference reflects the original optional status of the evening service.) During the repetition in the third blessing, the *kedushah* is recited. This is a prayer recited responsively based on verses quoted from the prophets. The *kedushah*, reciting *kaddish*, and reading from the Torah are among the elements of the service that are omitted when praying alone or without a *minyan*. In some congregations, there is no silent *amidah*; instead, the congregation recites the *amidah* aloud. In other congregations the first part of the *amidah* and the *kedushah* are recited together out loud and then everyone continues silently to the end of the prayer.

The *amidah* has a kind of choreography: it is traditional to bow four times while reciting it. The bowing is done at the beginning and end of the first *berakhah* of the *amidah*. Bend your knees at *barukh*, "praised are," and then bend over from the waist at *atah*, "you." Straighten up at the word *Adonai*, "God." This is done the same way in the next-to-

last *berakhah* of the *amidah*. We bow on the words *modim anahnu lakh*, "we thank you," at the beginning of the *berakhah*, and again on *barukh atah* at the end of the *berakhah*.

This manner of bowing is done at a number of other places in the liturgy. The two most common are during the call to pray (*barekhu*) which opens the main part of the *shaharit* and evening service and in the *aleinu* prayer which concludes every service. (We bow during the line *va-anahnu kor'im u-mishtabavim u-modim*, "We bend our knee and bow and acknowledge.")

Why bow? One understanding is that we are acting out the metaphor of God as king. As we approach the king we bow in obeisance before God's majesty and power. Another understanding sees the bowing as admitting that a world exists outside of ourselves. It acknowledges our own limitations. In support of this second interpretation is our custom of returning to an erect position when saying God's name. If the purpose of bowing is to bow before the king, then we should be bowing specifically at the mention of God. Instead, we stand erect, for we are not supposed to be fawning servants before the Almighty; rather we are to understand clearly that we are human beings, small specks in the universe which nonetheless carry a divine spark. We are humbled by our deficiencies and yet we stand facing the Holy One, for God desires partners in the work of creation.

Other prayers *Berakhot* include most of the essential elements of the liturgy. Other important prayers are the *aleinu* prayer at the conclusion of all services and the *kaddish*. The *kaddish* prayer, one of the few prayers recited in Aramaic, the common language of Jews in talmudic times, is a praise of God. It exists in a number of versions, the best-known of which is the mourner's *kaddish*. Though it does not speak about death, it is the widespread custom to recite this prayer after the death of an immediate relative (see p. 449). The *kaddish* is also used as a marker to conclude a large section of the service or to mark the imminent conclusion of a full service. As the former, the *kaddish* exists in a *batzi kaddish*, "half *kaddish*," version. As the latter, the *kaddish* exists in its *kaddish shalem*, "full *kaddish*," version.

An Outline of a Shabbat Morning Service

1. *Birkhot ha-shahar*, the morning blessings. This is a series of blessings related to awakening to the day. (For a fuller description see the first chapter of this book.)

2. *Pesukei de-zimra*, verses of praise. These are a number of Psalms or collected verses from Psalms, meant to be a preparation, a warm-up, for the main part of the service.

3. The Shema and its *berakhot*. This is the "Hear, O Israel" prayer, preceded and followed by blessings.

a. *Barekhu*, "let us bless," an opening call to join in prayer.

b. *Yotzer*, "creator of light," the first blessing, which is about God as creator and the daily renewal of the world.

c. *Ahavah rabbah*, "with great love," the second blessing, whose theme is God's love for us as expressed through the gift of Torah.

d. The Shema, "Hear, O Israel." This consists of three paragraphs from the Torah: Deut. 6:4-9, Deut. 11:13-21, and Num. 15: 37-41.

e. *Emet ve-yatziv*, "your teaching is true and enduring," the blessing after the Shema that describes God as redeemer.

4. *Amidah*, the "standing" prayer, consisting of seven blessings.

a. *Avot*, the "ancestors," focusing on the theme of the patriarchs' and matriarchs' relation to God.

b. *Gevurot*, God's "power," focusing on the theme of how God's power is manifested in the world. Traditionally, this includes the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Reform and Reconstructionist prayer books change this blessing to focus on God as the source of life.

c. *Kedushat ha-shem*, "God's holiness." This section includes the *kedushah* described above.

d. *Kedushat ha-yom*, "the sanctity of the day." This central blessing focuses on the holiness of Shabbat or the festival as appropriate. On Shabbat, this blessing is different in each of the four services of the day.

e. *Avodah*, "worship." This asks that our prayers be acceptable to God.

f. *Hoda'ah*, "thanksgiving." We are thankful for all the blessings of life. (In this blessing we bow twice as described above.)

g. *Birkat ha-shalom*, "prayer for peace."

The *amidah* is followed by a time for personal meditation. One of the rabbis of the Talmud composed a meditation, *elohai nitzor*, that is included in the prayer book as a beautiful model of a personal meditation, and also for recitation by those who are unprepared to offer their own meditation. It is often recited automatically, showing how the spontaneous prayer used as an example for others has instead become standard liturgy, obscuring this as a moment for spontaneous prayer.

When Shabbat coincides with a festival, Hallel, "Praise," is recited. This is a collection of Psalms (113-118) praising God. Otherwise the service continues with the second major part of Shabbat morning: the Torah reading.

5. The Torah reading begins with the singing of a number of verses that precede the taking of the Torah scroll out of the ark. The Torah is then carried through the congregation and brought to the reader's table. People are honored with *aliyot*, being called up to the Torah, which is then read to its cantillation. (For more details see "Torah: The Path of Study," pp. 139-75). After the Torah is read, it is lifted up and then wrapped. The reading from the Torah is followed by a chanted reading from the prophets, called the *haftarah*. (The *haftarah* is read from a printed book rather than a scroll.) The rabbis chose selections from the prophets based on the theme of each week's Torah reading. After the Torah service, the scroll is returned to its place in the ark.

6. In more traditional synagogues, the Torah reading is followed by *musaf*, the additional service. It is another *amidah* whose theme is the animal sacrifices in the Temple of Jerusalem. Many liberal synagogues, which do not believe in praying for the restoration of the sacrificial cult, have eliminated *musaf*. In either case, the service ends with a number of songs, the *aleinu* prayer, and the mourner's *kaddish*.

For more information, a good book to read is *Entering Jewish Prayer* by Reuven Hammer (Schocken, 1995).

Garments of Prayer

A *kippah*, “skullcap” (*yarmulka* in Yiddish), was traditionally worn all the time by a man. This custom is still observed in the Orthodox community. In liberal communities it has become the custom in most synagogues for men to wear a *kippah* during prayer services. In some Reform synagogues the wearing of a *kippah* is optional. In the last few years some women have begun to wear a *kippah* in liberal synagogues (traditional women have long worn some form of head covering when attending the synagogue). The *kippah* is commonly understood as a reminder that there is “someone,” i.e., God, above us.

There are also two ritual objects that are worn during prayer, specifically during *shaharit*, the morning service. The *tallit* is a prayer shawl. It is a rectangular piece of cloth with four corners. At each corner there are fringes tied in a specific manner. These *tzitzit*, “fringes,” transform the garment into a *tallit*.

The tallit Traditionally, the *tallit* was made of wool or linen. It was worn during morning services by men after they were married. Among liberal communities, the practice is for males to wear a *tallit* following their bar mitzvah. Some women also wear a *tallit* after their bat mitzvah. The *tallit* may be any combination of colors, but until recently it was most commonly white with black stripes. In modern times blue stripes have become common. Blue and white, the colors associated with the State of Israel and its flag, actually originated as the “Jewish colors” because of the *tallit*. In Numbers we find the source for *tzitzit* and *tallit*:

The Lord spoke to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. [Num. 15:37-39]

The rabbinic tradition understood these verses to mean that you should put fringes, *tzitzit*, on any garment that had four corners. Specifically, they developed the notion of wearing a four-cornered fringed garment during prayer (though this idea is not in the biblical text). They also posited the notion of the *tallit katan*, the small *tallit* that is a four-cornered undershirt with *tzitzit*, which is still worn by Orthodox Jews. Originally, one of the fringes at each corner of the *tallit* was dyed blue, hence the blue-and-white color. According to the tradition, this blue dye had to be made from a particular snail found in the Mediterranean. Sometime after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the identity of the snail was lost (or perhaps the snail population had been so diminished by the dye trade that it was impossible to find enough snails of this type), and so it was decided to forgo the use of blue in the fringes. (In the eighteenth century, a Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Gershon Henikh of Radzhin, claimed to have discovered the correct way to make the dye. His followers as well as a few others use blue fringes.)

In the late twentieth century, there began to be a greater diversity of materials and colors used in the cloth of the *tallit*. Weavers began producing *tallitot* (plural of *tallit*), making these new styles readily available. Different hues and even rainbow stripes became adopted by worshipers even in traditional communities, though the more conservative styles still predominate. As women began wearing *tallitot*, some experimented with departing from the traditional form of the *tallit* in order to distinguish between a man's and a woman's *tallit*. Yet all these variations shared having four corners and having the *tzitzit* tied in the traditional manner.

Symbolism of the tallit The *tallit* helps the worshiper create an environment conducive to prayer just by marking the time to worship in a physical way. At times it conveys a sense of being enveloped in the surrounding divine, while at other times it simply encloses us, helping us focus on praying. It is for the latter reason that some people cover the top and sides of their head with a large *tallit* to block out any distractions.

It was traditional to think of the color blue in the *tallit* as a royal blue

meant to remind us of God's kingship. In addition, the numerical value of the letters (*gematria*) of the word *tzitzit* is 600, which combined with the eight strings and five knots on each fringe adds up to 613, the traditional number of *mitzvot* in the Torah. Here, too, the symbolism is meant as a kind of focus, making us aware of the relationship between prayer and service to God.

The *tallit* is also known traditionally by its most important feature as the *arba kanfot*, "the four corners." A Hasid asked the Kotzker Rebbe what he should do, since he did not have a *tallit*. The Rebbe answered: Wrap yourself in the four corners of the world and then begin to pray.

How to put on a tallit Most *tallitot* have an *atarah*, literally "a crown." This is an extra border of material often decorated with words or a special design. It also signifies the top of the *tallit*. This part of the *tallit* should rest on the back of your neck with the design facing out. To put on a *tallit*, hold it spread out in front of you and say the blessing for donning a *tallit*. Then wrap it around your shoulders as though you were putting on a cape. A scarf-shaped *tallit* will hang down your front from your shoulders as it rests on the back of your neck. A larger-size *tallit* may require you to take the ends hanging in front and fold them up so some of the shawl is doubled up on your shoulders and yet it still hangs down over your front. Some people wrap the *tallit* around their heads after saying the blessing and before resting it on their shoulders.

The *tallit* is only worn during morning services (except on Yom Kippur, when it is worn all day, and Tisha be-Av, when it is worn only in the afternoon). In many congregations, the person leading the afternoon service wears a *tallit*. In some congregations the leader wears it during the evening service as well.

HOW TO TIE THE KNOTS

A set of *tzitzit*, or "fringes," can be purchased at a Jewish bookstore or on the Internet. Each set should be divided into four groups composed of one long string and three short strings. Take one group, line up all the strings at one end, and then fold in half,

giving you eight strings. Thread the strings through the corner hole of the *tallit*. Seven should be approximately the same length, with one much longer. This eighth string, called the *shammash* or "guardian" (like the extra candle on the Hanukkah menorah), is used to wind around the others. Now, taking four strings in one hand and four in the other, make a double knot. The knot should be at the edge of the garment. Then wrap the long string around the other seven strings seven times. Try to begin and end the wrapping at the same spot so you have exactly seven wrappings. Make a double knot as before. Wrap the long string eight times around the others followed by a double knot. Then eleven times, double knot, thirteen times, and a double knot.

Tefillin

Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead. [Deut. 6:8; see also Deut. 11:18, Exod. 13:16, 19]

This verse was traditionally understood not as a metaphor, but rather literally—that words of Torah should be bound upon the hand and head of the worshiper. *Tefillin* (literally, "prayer objects," but usually translated by the Greek-derived word *phylacteries*) are two little boxes, each containing four selections from the Torah. *Tefillin* are worn during morning services every weekday. The boxes have leather straps, which are used to attach one of the boxes to the arm and the other to the head.

The inside of the *tefillin* consists of four selections from the Torah, all of which mention *tefillin*. Two of these are also part of the Shema prayer. The verses are Exod. 13:1-10 and 13:11-16, and Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. They are written on parchment by a scribe, like the insert in the mezuzah and like the Torah scroll. In the *tefillin* of the hand they are on one parchment. In the *tefillin* of the head each passage is written on its own scroll and each scroll is in its own compartment.

Wearing *tefillin* is an ancient practice whose purpose is not made ex-

plicit. Certainly it can be a way to focus while praying. Putting the *tefillin* on the arm facing the heart and on your head is a way to bring hand, heart, and mind together. Similarly, it can be understood as a commitment to worship God with hand (deed), heart (intention), and mind (intellect).

Putting on tefillin Putting on *tefillin* is a little complicated and is best done following someone's example. The basic order is to put on the *tefillin* of the hand (*tefillin shel yad*), then the *tefillin* of the head (*tefillin shel rosh*), and then finish the wrapping of the straps around your fingers. When taking the *tefillin* off, you reverse the order.

1. Take the *tefillin* of the hand out of the bag in which it is stored. To facilitate this, it is customary to always put this *tefillin* on the left side of the bag. Unwrap the straps and remove the cover, if it has one.

2. Slip the *tefillin* up your forearm until it rests on top of the muscle. The tradition is to put the *tefillin* on your left arm, though someone who is a lefty, according to most halakhic authorities, wears *tefillin* on the right arm. The side with the straps should be closest to your body. The knot should be next to the box (*bayit*) of the *tefillin*. Then recite the *berakhah* (blessing). Tighten the strap by pulling on it through its loop. Wind it once around your upper arm to help keep the *tefillin* in place.

3. Wrap the strap clockwise seven times around your arm between your elbow and wrist. The black side of the strap should be visible. Then wrap the strap once around your palm, beginning with the outside of your hand. Wrap the remainder around the middle of your hand (palm). Finish by tucking the end under the wound strap (on the inside palm side of your hand).

4. Take the *tefillin* of the head out of the bag and unwind its strap and remove any cover. Holding the box in your hand, place it on your head. Its front edge should rest on your hairline (or where your hairline once was!). It should also be centered between your eyes. The back knot should rest on the nape of your neck at the back of your head. Then recite the blessing. Tighten the *tefillin* slightly by pulling down on

the straps on your head. The two loose straps that come from the knot should cross your shoulders and hang down over your chest to the waist. Some people tuck them through their belt to make sure that the black side remains facing out during services.

5. Release the strap on your hand and unwind it, leaving in place the first coil from your wrist to palm. Wrap it around your middle finger three times (twice between knuckle and hand, once above the knuckle). As you do each of these wrappings, recite the following verses: "And I will espouse you forever; I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy. And I will espouse you with faithfulness; then you shall be devoted to the Lord" (Hosea 2:21-22). Then wrap the strap under the ring finger and over the hand, forming a V. Then wrap a strap between the other two (forming the Hebrew letter *shin*) and wrap any extra around this middle coil and finish by tucking the end under the strap (on the inner palm side).

To take *tefillin* off, basically do everything in reverse order. Unwind the straps on your hand and temporarily wrap it all around the middle of the hand. Then take off the *tefillin* of the head. Put on its cover and wrap the strap around the box. There is no prescribed way to do this wrapping. Put it back on the right side of the bag. Then unwrap the *tefillin* of the hand, remove it, cover it, and wrap it up and put it in the bag.

A few pointers *Tefillin* are put on after putting on a *tallit* and taken off before taking off a *tallit*.

Nothing can be between your skin and the *tefillin*. Therefore, you need to roll up your sleeve and remove your watch from that hand.

Sephardic Jews have slightly different customs in regard to *tefillin*; for instance, they wrap the straps around the arm in a counterclockwise manner.

Sometimes people put a cover over the *tefillin* of the hand during services. While the *tefillin* of the head is supposed to be a "sign" and therefore visible to everyone, that of the hand can be covered even with a sleeve.

Tefillin are not worn on Shabbat or festivals, which are themselves a

“sign” or reminder of the holy. There is a variety of customs about wearing *tefillin* during *hol ha-moed*, the intermediate days of Sukkot and Passover. Some do not wear them, some do, and some do but do not recite the blessings over them. If worn, they are removed after the *amidah* of *shaharit*. On Rosh Hodesh, *tefillin* are worn as usual but are removed before *musaf*.

Tefillin should be checked periodically by a scribe to make sure the writing hasn't faded, etc. Some people have them checked twice in seven years.

Buying tefillin *Tefillin* are not inexpensive. Those that seem too cheap probably have Torah inscriptions that are mechanically reproduced instead of being handwritten by a scribe. According to traditional *halakhah*, only handwritten texts are “kosher.” *Tefillin* themselves are made from the skin of a kosher animal. The boxes should be square with sharp corners. Deluxe *tefillin* are typically made out of a single piece of leather. When buying the *tefillin* you should have the straps adjusted to fit your head and check for any other necessary adjustments. There are variations in customs that dictate whether the knot at the back of the head should resemble the Hebrew letter *daled* or *heb*.

Symbolism The manner in which the *tefillin* are wrapped spells out one of God's names: *Shaddai*. The letter *shin* is formed on the hand, The letters *daled* and *yood* are formed on the fingers or the *daled* is the knot on the nape of the neck and the *yood* is formed by the knot that is next to the box on the hand. The *shin* also appears on the box of the *tefillin* of the head. It is unusual, since it has four prongs rather than the usual three prongs. One interpretation is that is how the letter was written on the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which according to one tradition were incised all the way through the tablet so that they could be read from either side. Thus the four prongs create a regular *shin* in a “negative” image in the three spaces between them.

A KAVANAH OF FOCUS AND CONNECTION

Before putting on a *tallit*:

“Wrap yourself in light as a garment, stretch out the heavens like a curtain” (Psalm 104:2). I gather myself to pray, drawing together my scattered attention in order to focus. I look for the light within me and in so doing I find that my individual self is connected to the universe stretched out before me.

While putting on *tefillin*:

I bring together my heart and my mind in order to help make the activities of this day ones of holiness. As I wrap the *tefillin* seven times on my arm, I pause at the appropriate number corresponding to the day of the week, thus reminding myself of the uniqueness of this day. Wrapping the *tefillin* on my weak hand reminds me that it is not strength or power, but rather the aligning of heart, mind, and deed that brings together the letters of God's name.
