

Prayers

Jews do not need to go to synagogue to pray. They can (and do) say prayers anywhere. Many Jewish festivals and ceremonies are meant to be celebrated at home. Jews can pray alone, but Jewish people like to pray together if they can.

Jews say prayers to God 3 times each day - in the morning, the afternoon and the evening. They also say shorter prayers, such as blessings, at other times.

Jewish prayers can be said in any language, because Jews believe that God hears the prayers that are in your heart and can understand them whatever language they are spoken in. Most Jews prefer to say at least some of their prayers in Hebrew, because that is the language that the Torah was written in and because Jews have used that language for generations.

Jews use lots of different kinds of prayer.

- There are prayers to praise God and say how wonderful He is.
- There are prayers to ask God for things (such as a good harvest);
- There are prayers to say "thank you" to God for all the things He has made;
- There are prayers to remind people of how God wants them to behave.

"Thank you" prayers usually start with the phrase Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe... so they are called Blessings.

Blessings

In Hebrew the word for a blessing is **BAROCHAH**. (The ch sounds like the end of the word loch - a bit like the sound you make when you are clearing your throat). This is because the Hebrew word for blessed is Baruch (ברוך). בְּרוּךְ

There are lots and lots of different blessings, to thank God for most of the things that we eat, drink, see, hear, feel or smell. There are also blessings for most occasions. Here are a just a few examples:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who created the fruit of the vine.

(This is said before drinking wine)

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who created the light of fire.

(This is said before lighting candles)
Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth
bread from the earth.

(This is said before eating bread)
Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who created the fruit
of the trees.

(This is said before eating fruit)
Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who made creation.

(This is said on seeing lightning, a high mountain or a great desert)
Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who made the sea.

(This is said on seeing the sea)

One important blessing is said for new things such as:

- wearing new clothes for the first time,
- tasting a particular fruit for the first time in its season,
- moving into a new home,
- the first day of a festival.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive
and preserved us and enabled us to reach this season.

Saying this blessing is known as saying a shechichianu (that's a difficult word to say even in Hebrew! Remember the ch has a special sound. Shechichianu means who has kept us alive).

Activity

Discuss what you think are the most important things to thank God for.

Make up blessings for them.

Why do you think that Jewish people say blessings even for things that don't seem to be important?

Teachers' Notes

Barochot for foods and drinks are only said once at each sitting. eg the blessing for wine is said before the first taste but not before every sip.

Barochot are similar in tone to the short prayers that many schools use to end assemblies.

Jews do not kneel when they pray nor do they put their hands together as many Christians would do.

Judaism does not make a great use of sung hymns, although there are a few prayers that are usually sung. This is not to say that Jewish prayer is unmusical - far from it. Many prayers have sung sections of anything from a few words to several lines interspersed with spoken passages.

The proportion of a service that is said in Hebrew will vary from community to community. More orthodox communities will conduct their services almost entirely in Hebrew, some progressive communities conduct their services almost entirely in English and there are many that fall between the two extremes.

Jewish services are very formal. At each Sabbath morning service, for example, the same prayers will be said in the same order - very little will change from week to week except for the Torah readings and the supporting readings from the Prophets. The same is true of every other service, whether in the synagogue or in the home. Each service has its set pattern. Given this, and the fact that many Jews do not understand the Hebrew that they are reading, it is unsurprising that Jews have developed a strong idea of the greater importance of what is in the heart than what is in the mouth. A Chasidic story illustrates this well:

A poor man, lost in the woods, found himself at nightfall without his prayer book. And he addressed this petition to the Almighty: 'Dear God, I have done a stupid thing: I do not have my prayer book. And I have such a poor memory that I cannot recite the prayers by heart. ... But You know all the prayers, Lord - so I'll just recite the letters of the alphabet, and You put them together in the right way.'

And the Almighty regarded that prayer, because of its sincerity, more worthy than any of the others He heard that day.