



LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

www.huc.edu/libraries

Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

Contemplative Service of the Heart: Tradition, Theology, and Innovation

Sara Abrams

Rabbinic Thesis

2013

Acknowledgements:

In the spring of 2011 Rabbi Laura Geller and congregant Marcie Zelikow decided that they would like to hold a Contemplative Service at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills and invited me to facilitate it. Since then, many songs and prayers have been birthed and a community of people has come together to create this service. Without their spiritual inspiration, input, and advice, this thesis would not have been possible. My deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Rabbi Richard Levy for his encouragement, patience, enthusiasm, and inspiring love for God, Judaism, and his many students, and my rabbinic advisor, Dr. Leah Hochman, who encouraged me to make this project my thesis. I also would like to acknowledge the congregants at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills and volunteer musicians Jeffrey Prince and Bruce Phillips, who have opened their hearts to the sentiment behind the service and who continually join with me to praise the Holy One.

Introduction

In Psalm 139, the psalmist contends that wherever he goes he cannot escape the divine spirit. He asks, "Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence" (139:7). Abraham our forefather had a direct connection to God and followed and gave himself over to God's direction, and Moses our greatest teacher and prophet had a sacred intimacy with the Holy One. The Torah gives us many examples of people who experience the presence of God via Godself or God's messengers. If these are our most powerful examples, should we doubt the capacity that we who are also God's creation and likeness are exempt from such exalted experience? We have privileged the rational mind over the realm of spirituality and intuition—our task now is to bring these two dimensions of the soul into harmony. In my extensive work as a rabbinic intern in the hospital, many Jews have expressed to me that they have not only had to seek their spirituality outside of Judaism, but they find that synagogue experience empty, devoid of any spirituality. For many, Jewish worship has failed to teach congregants to pray, failed to inspire or guide people into their own sacred connection with the Infinite. Perhaps this difficulty is a result of a genuine lack of faith or perhaps this calls for our leadership to learn how to open up in spontaneous prayer, to open their hearts publicly and humble themselves before God.

For the many Jews who do not know Hebrew, and even for those who do, the messages and the metaphors of traditional Jewish prayer are so complex that they are difficult to grasp without an extensive Hebraic and Jewish education. Many Jews both of the baby boomer generation and Generation X (and I am sure soon the Millenials) find themselves alienated from the spiritual side of Judaism and seek a way to reconnect to tradition through the heart, the realm of feeling. They prefer a spirituality that speaks to an inner journey. In some cases, contemporary Jews find traditional and even Reform communal prayer alienating and lacking in meaning, and services are seen as a brick wall rather than an open gate which shows the way into a relationship with God. Some Jews find the order of

the prayers at the synagogue to be devoid of personal import. They may come to synagogue to uncover the spiritual and to foster their connection to God, and instead they leave feeling little connection to the Divine or to their own spirits. Many of these Jews leave Judaism forever and find their spiritual homes in Yoga, Hinduism, Christianity, or Buddhism. Yoga studios are filled with Jews and Jewish teachers, and yet few of these seekers feel that they can enter a synagogue and find the tools to uplift their spirit and connect to God and to God within.

How can we create a prayer space that addresses this problem of “a lack of spirituality?” How do we create a space which teaches people to pray, which seeks to open the hearts so that the Divine Presence descends-- if but for a moment-- and reminds us that we are a part of that Presence? Behind the efforts of this service is an assertion that we can indeed experience the Divine. God is not just transcendent, but also immanent. Many believe that God is remote from our world. However, the theology behind this service challenges that notion, for without the experience of the Divine, how can we consider devoting our lives to it? The mystics believe that the Divine can be experienced and that the notion of *devekut* (clinging to God) is a reality. This service intends to facilitate the pathways for a gentle *devekut*, a resting in the resplendence of God and seeing ourselves as God’s creation. Just as God saw that each part of God’s creation was “good” or “beautiful,” so too when we see ourselves as God’s beautiful creation we can begin to see others as God’s creation as well.

As leaders, all of us have the ability not to be simply a *shaliach tzibur* but also a *shaliach Hashem*, an emissary of God, particularly when we lead others in prayer. Modeling is a central component in any kind of teaching. Not only can we model our way of prayer for the congregation as *shaliach tzibur*, but our relationship/intimacy with God, whatever that notion of God may be, gives us the privilege to model and share it. In the Chasidic model the rebbe acts as a vessel between heaven and earth; he brings down the divine influx from heaven and shares it with the *kahal*. The rebbe/chasid model may not work for those who are more rationally oriented, but should we choose to take on this role, we have the possibility to

share our own holy relationship with God in order to inspire others who are creating theirs. In this way, this service is a showcase of my own deeply intimate relationship with the Eternal, inspired by tradition, mystical and rabbinic Judaism. As a teacher, I seek to offer an alternative way to pray, to show and share my own prayer with those who seek a more personal connection with the Divine. Sharing such intimacy such as personal prayers and cavanot, illustrates my own vulnerability and nurtures the capacity for each congregant to find the courage to be vulnerable before God and before the community. At its best, prayer unearths the tenderness in each of us. Prayer helps us to realize how small we are in comparison with the vastness of God, and teaches us to give over our control to the master of the ship. Prayer helps us to admit that we are directed by a seemingly unknowable force that changes our destiny and like the wind, sets us assail. To act in prayer is to petition and praise the majesty that has bestowed upon us the ability to evolve and become ever more human, both of the spirit and of the earth. Prayer expresses the yearning with which the psalmist praises “You hedge me before and behind; You lay Your hand upon me. It is beyond my knowledge; it is a mystery; I cannot fathom it” (139:5-6).

As someone who has cultivated the practice of personal prayer, I seek to model that intimacy and awe for God in this service. Each new chant reflects my interpretation of the liturgy. I have tried to unearth the jewels from every prayer and simplify them. The more people can understand, the more avenues arise in which they too can connect in their own language. Our rabbis composed a sequential and intelligent method for connecting to God—I try to preserve their trajectory and intention while at the same time allowing for my voice and the voices of the congregants to send up their own prayers. The siddur ought to be a flexible guide, not a strict rubric of musts and have-tos.

As the composer of this service, I have found my inspiration in the intelligence and wisdom of the tradition’s love for God. Embedded in each section of the traditional service lies the theological foundations that I have incorporated in the service below. Like

traditional *Shacharit*, I have included the six different sections of the service: *Birchot Hashachar*, *P'sukei D'Zimra*, *Shema Uvirchotecha*, *Amidah*, *Aleinu*, and *Kaddish*. Each section incorporates the motifs and principles of its respective grouping in order to attain the form and intention of the traditional service. Although the sections have been retained along with the sentiment within them, I have omitted many prayers and simplified others, and included additional innovative prayer. Through these sections, I seek to situate the basics of the history and theology behind traditional Tefilah, and to explain the ways in which I have adapted and integrated those principles into the Contemplative Service. Some of the chants and prayers are original and others I have borrowed.

Marked by its prolix nature, Jewish liturgy is full of many ways of expressing one's devotion for, and awe of, God. The rubric of prayer leads us to the most essential messages: love God, God loves us. Every prayer aims to orient us to these central messages, some more directly and others with more artfulness. Each component of this service has a simple point, a rubric that I will explain below.

1. Mah Tov: Let us sanctify this space.
2. Tree of Life Meditation: Let us come into this space and prayer practice with our full body and soul.
3. Hineini: I am present and ready to meet the Holy One.
4. Ruchi Chalamti: I long for You: my spirit is a part of You and wants to return to You.
5. Nisim B'Chol Yom: How grateful I am that you have created me and the world on this day. I praise my particularity in movement and form.
6. Bo Habayita: We are yearning for you, God, and we invite You into our prayer.

7. Nishmat Kol Chai: May every living, breathing thing praise You.
8. Hinach Yafa Rayati: I allow God and others to see my divine beauty and I give myself permission to see it in them.
9. Niflaim Maasecha: How wonderful I am because You created me! I praise you for this miracle!
10. Meditation on the Light: I allow the radiance of Adonai to surround me. God continually creates through the light.
11. Yichud: We enter the Oneness as individuals. We meld into the Source and reemerge.
12. Shema: God is one
13. V'ahavta: We will love this oneness and consciousness of the One with everything we have.
14. Amidah: How holy is the Oneness that creates us and that we can experience!
15. Aleinu: We are humbled by God's greatness and Infinity. We surrender to You, God.
16. Kaddish: God is great.

These chants and prayers are the steps we can take each day, both in the traditional service and in this one, in order to grow ever nearer to the One that is all. In this thesis I hope to create and convey the experience of prayer in a simplified form that speaks to the essence of Judaism and that nurtures and inspires Jews and others to return to God.

Birchot Hashachar

Mah Tovu

מה טובו אהלך יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכַּנְתְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל

Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov

Mishk'notecha Yisrael

How good are your tents, Jacob
Your dwelling places, Israel.

Tree of Life Centering Meditation

Ruchi Chalamti

רוחי חלמתי
לחזור עליך
מקור חיים

Ruchi Chalamti (4x)
Lachazor Alecha (3x)
Makor Chayim

The dream of my soul
is to return to you
Source of Life

Elohai Neshama¹

אלהי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא

Elohai n'shama shenatata bi t'horah hi

My God, the soul You have given me, She is pure.

Nisim B'Chol Yom

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם . . .
Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam . . .

Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe for . . .

¹ Music by Shefa Gold

Hineini²

הַנִּנִּי, הַנִּנִּי
כְּשֶׁהַשֵּׁם יִקְרָא אֶת שְׁמִי, הַנִּנִּי
הַנִּנִּי, הַנִּנִּי
כְּשֶׁהַשֵּׁם יָבוֹא לִפְנֵי
הַנִּנִּי, הַנִּנִּי

Hineini, Hineini,
Cishe Ha'shem yikra et shmi, Hineini, Hineini (2x)
Hineini, Hineini
Cishe Ha'shem yavo lifanai Hineini, Hineini (2x)

When Hashem calls my name *Hineini, Hineini (2x)*
Hineini, Hineini
When Hashem comes before me *Hineini (2x)*
Hineini, Hineini

Explanation

The essence of the spiritual life of a Jew is to constantly grow and move forward to higher and higher levels of da'at—knowledge of, and connection with, God. Physical movement generates enthusiasm and fervor in the heart, firing one to rise to greater heights of service and putting unholy passions to flight.³

If the essence of spiritual life as a Jew is to grow constantly in our connection with God, as Reb Nosom, a disciple of Reb Nachman, suggests, then the morning blessings act as the prelude to the grand symphony that prayer from the heart has to offer. For the Chasidim, prayer was not only a fulfillment of obligation, but a place to express the ecstasy of one's devotion to God, and under the guidance of the proper leader, a vehicle to experience the Divine Presence.⁴ The life of prayer encourages us to invite God into every moment, to remind us that we are never far or distant (although we may frequently feel ourselves to be), that God's love and compassion for us are ever near. The human condition so often takes us away from this spiritual truth: how deeply do we experience our separateness, do we feel cut

² Lyrics and music by Sara Abrams

³ Reb Nosom, *Likutey Tefilot Reb Noson's Prayers Volume I*, trans. Avraham Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1992), 58.

⁴ Ben Zion Bokser, *The Jewish Mystical Tradition* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981), 28.

off from others, much less God! Throughout our lives and in our daily interactions we are drawn out of the quiet of the soul that dwells deep within us. Through the various methods of communication, work, child rearing and the frenetic pace of modern life, we are left with fewer and fewer tools to connect with the soul, the *nesham* that although encased in the world, remains a part of the Eternal. Proverbs 8 says “He created me at the beginning of His course; As the first of His works of old. In the distant past I was fashioned . . .” (8:22). Wisdom is speaking here, but it also reflects the mystical understanding of the soul as part of the Eternal. While the body and personality die, the *nesham*, the spark of divinity, like God, transcends time. How do we awaken our *neshamot* to know ourselves as *betzelem Elohim*, the children of the Infinite Presence? In mysticism we understand that God is everywhere, yet the paradox remains: if God is everywhere, in everything, why do we experience separateness? If we are already a part of God, why must we seek unification. This thesis cannot address the multitude of theological questions that necessarily arise. However, the Baal Shem Tov taught that “evil is the footstool to the good,” meaning that our separateness and all the actions that derive from the experience of it, are essential obstacles that facilitate the unification that already pervades the universe. Prayer offers us the possibility of crossing over that separation into unity. It provides an opportunity to reconnect, to refuel, and to beckon the Divine into our lives. The morning blessings invite us to continue the journey inward toward the eternal *nesham*. Each blessing directs us to give thanks for the gift of life, and to express gratitude for the workings of mind, body and spirit in order to continue the ongoing ascent toward the Holy One.

The journey toward God travels in all directions. Since God permeates the universe, God’s presence is not necessarily above but rather derives from a higher consciousness that sees beyond the limits of our finite experience on earth. We can locate this consciousness through an elevated and “heady” experience that the traditional ascent of prayer seeks to

stimulate, and we can also travel to this depth through the heart. As the internal pathway, the heart allows us to uncover the Eternal within.

In this section I will review the central themes of the traditional *Birchot Hashachar* and explain the connections that I have made in this section of the Contemplative Service. I will relate the themes of *Birchot Hashachar* to the service, as well as expand on how it addresses the theological and mystical precepts that influence both the reasoning behind the traditional service and the integration of individual and contemplative prayer into mine.

The section of *Birchot Hashachar* marks the beginning of the day of prayer. Many of the prayers within it assert mystical themes that emphasize our innate connection with the creator, the nature and eternality of the soul, the binding nature of prayer, and the view that our lives are offerings for God. This series of prayers acknowledges that every component of existence-- physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual-- is a gift from God and contains the radiance therein. Resurrection plays a major part not only in prayer more generally but in these morning blessings. According to the siddur, each day encompasses the resurrection that will come at the end of times.⁵ Sleep itself is a kind of death, considered 1/60th of death by the rabbis (*Talmud Bavli*, Ber.57b). Consequently, every day of waking contains the miracle of resurrection. During sleep, the rabbis taught, the soul was thought to journey into heavenly realms, and upon waking it reenters the physical body.⁶ Therefore each morning presents a moment of rebirth, of reconnection, and an opportunity to refocus the purpose of life: to grow ever closer to the Holy One. An extensive warm-up for the body, mind, and spirit, the morning blessings help us to remember that our religious priority here on earth is to reconnect to God through every component of our bodily and spiritual makeup.

5. Daniel Landes, "The Halakhah of Waking Up" in *My People's Prayer Book*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 36.

6. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York, Atheneum, 1970), 234.

Intrinsic to prayer is the notion that the soul is eternal. The Evening *Shema* acknowledges the many migrations the soul has made over eternity. It says: "I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me . . . whether through speech, deed, thought, or notion: whether in this transmigration or another transmigration—I forgive every Jew."⁷ This text acknowledges the cycles of the soul, and that the soul has inhabited many forms and bodies. Each soul journey offers the opportunities for forgiveness and divine connection. The mystical idea that "we descend in order to ascend" speaks to the ongoing transformation of the soul in its journey of lifetimes, as well as days. Each day is another opportunity to ascend (Tanya, Chapt. 31). Thus, our waking-up in the morning calls us to bless the unique physicality in which God has chosen to implant our souls. Each day, the soul, resurrected once again, begins another encounter with the continual ascent towards the Holy One.

Originally these early morning blessings- *Modah Ani*, *Tallit*, *Asher Yazar*, *Elohai Neshama*, *Nisim B'Chol Yom*- were recited in the home.⁸ As one encountered waking and other morning activities (in addition to laying Tefillin), one was to bless each aspect in an expression of gratitude and as a reminder of our intrinsic connection to God. Upon waking, one praises God for returning the soul to the body, for the excretions, for washing the hands, for straightening the body, and for taking the first steps. For every physical motion, we praise God. Designed for the individual, the blessings address the very personal motions each of us encounters as we wake up. Each blessing acts as a reaffirmation of the soul reentering physical form and an assertion of our ongoing relationship with the creator. The blessings within the Siddur serve as a guidebook for the practitioner, cueing him to give thanks for the miracle of the workings of the body. Most of these blessings have their roots in the Talmud, although medieval and modern authors have altered the way we express some

7. Rabbi Nossom Scherman et al, ed., *The Complete Artscroll Siddur* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993), 289.

8. Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer* (New York; Schocken Books, 1995), 109.

of these blessings (did not make me a woman, gentile etc. . .) from the negative to the affirmative, though many of them remain the same. It may be jarring to the modern ear to hear these negative examples of gratitude, yet when we consider that each soul may have had many transmigrations, we may look at this differently. Thanking for what we are not may contain an appreciation for the particularity in which we have been created in the present moment.

Although Maimonides wanted these prayers to remain in the home, he lost the argument to the *Shulchan Aruch* (Joseph Caro) who argued that such prayers should be brought into the synagogue for the sake of “the ignorant people who do not know.”⁹ Out of concern that these prayers were not being recited at home, the rabbis over time included them in the synagogue service. These prayers, as mentioned previously, are also understood as a resurrection of the soul and foreshadow the ultimate resurrection at the end of time. This process is physical as well as metaphysical: “the day is met not just physically, but metaphysically: we awaken as individuals, but quickly affirm ourselves as mattering because of our covenant with God.”¹⁰ The morning blessings serve as not only the first step to ascend in prayer toward the Holy One, but they also represent the ongoing awakening of our hearts as we move ever closer into our connection with God.

Many omissions have been made from the traditional *Birchot Hashachar* in the Reform prayer book. While prayers of the body and soul have been reintegrated in the service as Reform Judaism has become more traditionally and spiritually inclined, the study portions on the *Korbanot and Akeda* have been omitted. For some of us, such pictures of hierarchy and submission that are a part of sacrifice, both in terms of the sacrifice of Isaac that required obedience to a God that is greater than us, and general laws of animal sacrifice, are off putting but as we take refuge in religious understanding of God as one, we realize that

9. Landes, 38

10. Lawrence A. Hoffman, “Blessings and Study the Jewish Way to Begin a Day” in *My People’s Prayer Book Volume I*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 16.

we are but an expression of the manifestation of the One, and therefore a servant of that Oneness. From God we came, and to God we will return. Our lives, then, are best spent as servants, who day after day present a beautiful offering of our own souls. Although as Reform Jews we have omitted these passages on sacrifice, we can incorporate the notion of offering, and a submission of our lives to a greater purpose.

Since Joseph Caro won the argument over the recitation of the morning blessings in the synagogue, a prayer to sanctify our synagogues' space was needed. *Mah tovu* has remained an integral part of modern prayer books and precedes the personal blessings. "How good are your tents, O Jacob," the prayer affirms that the dwelling places of Israel are good, beautiful, and sacred. *Mah tovu* can also be an affirmation. By invoking the goodness of our interior spaces, our *kavanah* through *Mah Tovu* supports the holiness with which God has created the multiple aspects of creation. When we assert the holiness of our space and our bodies, we support the sacred and raise the spark of God that has been implanted in our beings.

As with the traditional service, within the Contemplative Service *Birchot Hashachar* acts to resurrect the soul within the body, both by becoming more present and attuned to our physical bodies as well as the pure spirit which resides within them. In order to create a more contemplative service than what is traditional, I have in some places omitted blessings and prayers and in other places added original chants that simplify the themes of the service and add a more individual emphasis for the practitioner. In this section of the Contemplative Service I have included *Mah Tovu*, Tree of Life Centering Meditation, *Ruchi Chalamti*, *Elohai Neshama*, *Nisim B'Chol Yom*, and *Hineini* as part of *Birchot Hashachar*. For the purpose of this thesis, I have included all of these prayers and meditations but each can be offered individually or can be omitted for time constraints, or inserted into another part of the service. Each prayer aims to honor the relationship of each soul to the Divine and to embrace the Sabbath as a gift of time for us to become whole again. Acts of prayer can be

revolutionary: and that is part of my intention here, for it is revolutionary in an age where we are continually bombarded by messages and consumerism, to stake out a holy space for ourselves, to literally become whole again by stepping into the soul, and by inviting God into our lives. Just as Heschel writes that the Sabbath “is a day for freedom . . . a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization . . . a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature,”¹¹ so too does prayer offer an alternative to the machine of our culture, by offering tiny Sabbaths through the day.

Mah Tov

By including *Mah Tov*, I have sought to include both a familiar chant as well as its function to sanctify the prayer space. In prayer we seek to enter as well as create a holy space both in our environment and in our physical form. The familiar chant, in contrast to the newer chants in the service, helps to make participants more comfortable with entering this unfamiliar prayer style. Each chant and meditation aims to allow space for each person to get in touch with the Divine within, and invites the outer Divine to assist as well. The nature of our existence in the world is relational, and as the mystical saying asserts: “As above, so below,” our ability to grow spiritually must take place with the Divine that lies outside of us as well as inside. Each prayer, as with classical liturgy asserts this theological truth, of our intrinsic relationship to God. Just as there is a component in each one of us which is eternal, so too must we invite the Eternal Source to aid us in our efforts at uncovering this precious spark within.

Tree of Life Meditation

11. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (New York: The Noon Day Press, 1998), 28.

Birchot Hashachar affirms the resurrection of the soul and so too do these chants and meditations, but rather than creating a blessing for each and every part and function of the body, I chose the Tree of Life Meditation whose visualization brings people into their bodies, not only through words uttered by the blessings, but through visualization and guided imagery. This meditation aims to center the individual within himself, to refocus and call back pieces of him/herself that he has left out in the world as well as to release anything that he/she may be carrying of someone else's.

At this point I would offer the following meditation:

Uncross the legs and arms. Allow the feet to touch the floor and make them parallel to each other. Relax the shoulders. Bring the belly into the spine. Allow the back ribs to move forward towards the heart. Allow the heart to lift toward the heavens. Imagine a tree running through the spine or behind the spine to support you. This tree might be a tree from childhood, one you have seen on an outdoor trip, or from your own backyard. See the tree as having abundant roots that reach all the way to the center of the earth. Now see the multiple branches of the tree reaching into the sky. Take several slow breaths that move up and down the tree trunk. Experience it as earthly and heavenly, perfectly balanced between spirit and matter. Turn your attention first to the feet. See your feet as part of the roots that travel to the center of the earth. Now turn your inward gaze toward the branches. See the branches garnering light from the cosmos, bring that light through the branches into the head and neck, the shoulder girdle, the heart, the stomach and intestinal wall, through the reproductive organs, into the thighs, calves, and feet. Now that the body has been filled with light, it is time to realign and recall the many parts of ourselves. So now we turn our attention to the branches. Sometimes when we go out into the world, in our work or with our family, we leave pieces of ourselves that belong to us in the hands of others. For instance, maybe you had a conversation with a friend where you left feeling empty, or more depressed. This isn't about not sharing our love with others, but rather sometimes we can get confused

and give a piece of ourselves away when it really belongs at home in our own hearts. Using the breath to assist us, we will ask for those parts of ourselves that we left out in the world to travel back through the branches and land right inside our energetic heart at the center of the chest. Even if you cannot think of specific instances, simply ask for those parts of yourself that you left out in the world to return. You may also apply this to childhood memories or patterns (at this point there is a pause). Now that we have collected ourselves back into the heart (you may feel that your chest feels more full than at the beginning), we are going to now release anything that we might have picked up from someone else that does not belong to us. Just like when we are out in the garden we pick up pieces of dirt and dust and sometimes flowers and drops of water, so too when we are in the world do we sometimes take in feelings and things that do not belong to us. On the exhale imagine these pieces falling out down through the tree trunk, into the center of the earth. Again, if you cannot think of anything specific, that's fine, simply ask that anything that does not belong to you fall through the trunk, into the roots, and then down to the center of the earth. Now that we have gathered ourselves and released anything foreign to our systems, let's once more breathe the light into our limbs and organs. Press the feet into the floor, rub the hands across the thighs and when you are ready slowly open your eyes.

Hineini

We take a pause after the meditation begin to chant *Hineini*. Although *Hineini* cannot be found in the daily prayer book (it is included at the beginning of the Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur Musaf), its meaning is often translated as “Behold, I am here” or “I am ready,” and thus speaks to the need of the individual to meet God in prayer. In the Bible, this term most often appears when the Infinite One has called forth an individual to fulfill a divine task. God and God’s messengers call out to the prophets and forefathers among them Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, and Samuel, and when addressed by the Holy One, they answer with the dignified and humble, “*Hineini*.” Today “*Hineini*,” might mean for us “I am

present, I am ready to connect, I am ready to pray to/with you.” The act of prayer is an act of humility, it requires the admission that we are not in charge, and the willingness to engage with and possibly to submit to a higher power. At the beginning of prayer, we make ourselves humble but also acknowledge how even in our smallness, we still matter to God and can be called and beckoned like our prophets and ancestors. The chant seeks to nurture that presence and humility and contribute to an ongoing relationship that I hope each person can form with God. Just as other prayers in *Birchot Hashachar* prepare us for the day, in waking up and coming before God in humility, so too does “*Hineini*.” The chant seeks to cultivate this sense of being present, present for ourselves, present to the spirit, present and ready to show up when we are called.

Leviticus Rabbah explores what it means to be called. The book of Leviticus begins with the verse “the Lord called to Moses . . .” In *Hineini* one of the verses says “When Hashem calls my name, I am here.” Modeled after the ancestors and the prophets who answered “I am here” when God, or the Angel of the Lord called, this “calling” raises the question of what it means for us to be called by God. *Leviticus Rabbah* also asks what the significance is that God calls to us, especially to Moses. Although the book of Leviticus begins with God calling to Moses, *Leviticus Rabbah* acknowledges that God spoke to many others as well. Is there something different in God’s call to Moses than to Noah or Adam? The rabbis ask “Well it is not undignified for a king to speak with his tenant?” The text concludes “well, it is not undignified for a king to talk to his herdsmen.” The text suggests that although God is so much greater than us, God can still speak to us, even if we are humble herdsmen. This particular passage also asserts the special relationship that God had to Moses. For when God called to Abraham it was through an angel, whereas God called to Moses directly. For those of us who are not literally written within the pages of Torah and Midrash, we too ask that question, why would the Holy One bother to call us, are we not too small for God to bother with us? The text affirms that while we are mere tenants for the

king, the king still seeks us out, like Adam, Abraham, Noah, and finally, most directly with Moses. The more we ascend to the highest spiritual heights, the more direct the call becomes, not only from the lips of the angels but from God, Godself.

Upon waking we remember that our purpose in this lifetime is to return to God while we are still alive. Our soul yearns for God, to return to the Source of Life. In that spirit, the chant *Ruchi Chalamti* captures the longing of the soul for God, to return back to the source, the infinite energy. By placing it at this point in the service, after the meditation and *Hineini*, we continue to warm-up the soul and the individual to awaken to prayer. *Ruchi Chalamti* nourishes the mystic's eternal wish to return to God: "The dream of my soul: To return to You; Source of Life." Just as in the traditional siddur *Adon Olam* is included in *Birchot Hashachar* a poetic rendering of God's all-pervasive presence throughout time, *Ruchi Chalamti* addresses our desire to approach this Oneness and bring it into our lives and into our daily experience.

Nisim B'Chol Yom

Next in the Contemplative service comes *Nisim B'Chol Yom*. To garner involvement and gratitude, this prayer will be done spontaneously rather than keeping the traditional guidelines of what to bless. As mentioned in the previous section, these prayers were meant to be reserved for home, but due to "general ignorance" of the lay people were brought into the synagogue to ensure that they would be recited. In keeping with bringing the blessings of gratitude into the communal environment, this prayer when spontaneously offered creates a greater sense of community and gratitude. We begin the prayer with "*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam*" and conclude each blessing in English with the congregant's personal selection. Typically, it takes time for congregants to feel comfortable offering up an expression of gratitude, but by the time we have said a few blessings, people begin to open up, smile, and the mood and shyness lifts. As with the traditional *Birchot Hashachar*, this

blessing opens the heart through the very personal demonstration of gratitude for all parts of life.

Between each prayer we allow a moment's pause. These pauses permit us to feel the effects of our prayers and the vibration of our voices, and allow more time for the individual to contemplate and receive the light of the Divine. Because in this service we do not have to rush to get through all the prayers, we permit ourselves to absorb the effects that the chants, pauses, and meditations offer us.

To conclude this section, I have included the *Elohai Neshama* chant by Shefa Gold for its emphasis on the purity of the spirit within. "God gave us a pure soul" says the prayer and by acknowledging this we begin our entrée into that soul, to access it and bring it forth into the service and hopefully our daily lives. *Elohai Neshama* follows the blessing *Asher Yatzar* which praises God for the workings of the inner organs. The sequence marries the idea that we are souls in bodies who must give thanks for the materiality of the body as we do in *Asher Yatzar* and *Nisim B'col Yom* as well as praise the soul for its eternal connection to God.

Birchot Hashachar both in this service and in the more traditional service is a warm up for the body and soul. This section teaches us to give thanks for the resurrection of the soul from sleep into the material reality of this world, and fosters in us the desire for integration of the soul into physical form as we continue throughout the day. I have included each chant and meditation to remind us of our inherent connection to God, to touch upon our soul's longings and to offer gratitude for the many blessings we receive. By simplifying the prayers, chanting them, and bringing in meditation we allow the personal experience becomes the focal point in place of a strict rubric of prayer. In effect by resurrecting the soul through gratitude, we are reminded of our own purity, and thus prepared for the next section, *Pesukei D'zimra* where we allow ourselves to praise God in joy for God's creations of the

earth, its inhabitants and our experience of its beauty. If the service is an ascent to the pinnacle, traditionally seen as the *Amidah* (or on Shabbat the Torah Service), then we have moved through the first ascent and prepared for the next, reaching ever higher in prayer with the intention of individually and collectively connecting to our souls and the Divine Presence.

P'sukei D'zimra

Bo Habayita Come Home!¹²

בוא הביתה

Bo habayita

יְי, יְי הביתה

Adonai, Adonai Habayita

Bo . . .

אל רחמן, אל רחמן הביתה

El Rachaman, El Rachaman Habayita

Bo . . .

אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם, אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם הביתה

Adon Olam, Adon Olam Habayita

Bo . . .

שְׁכִינָה, שְׁכִינָה הביתה

Shechina, Shechina Habayita

Bo . .

Nishmat Kol Chai

Breathing Exercises

Niphla'im Ma'asecha¹³

נִפְלְאִים מַעֲשֶׂיךָ

אוֹדֶךָ

12. Lyrics and music by Sara Abrams

13. Music by Sara Abrams, lyrics adapted from Psalm 139:14

על כי נוראות, נפליתי
Niphlaim ma'asecha
Odecha
Al Ki Noraot Niphleiti

I praise You, for I am awesomely,
wondrously made!

Hinach Yafah – from Song of Songs 1:15¹⁴

הַנָּךְ יָפָה רַעֲיָתִי הַנָּךְ יָפָה

Hinach yafah ra'yati,
Hinach yafah

How beautiful are you, my friend, how beautiful.

Explanation

Birchot Hashachar serves as a warm-up for prayer; a reveling in the resurrection of the soul and an interlude of blessings which speak to the miracle of creation. It asks us to foster the courage to see ourselves as divine and human, spirit implanted in form. Through praise we bless God and bless ourselves. We seek realignment and a re-centering of the soul. In the Contemplative Service, *Mah Tovu, Hineini*, the introductory meditation, *Ruchi Chalamti, Nisim B' Chol Yom*, and *Elohai Neshama* all cultivate the sense of being blessed by God by attending to the body and praising each limb of the body as a marvelous creation. In the next section of the service, *P'sukei D'zimra*, we continue the warm-up for the *Shema* and *Amidah*, the pinnacle experiences of our prayer practice. While *Birchot Hashachar* expresses gratitude to the creator for the formation of our bodies and souls and affirms God as being the sole creator of the universe, *Psukei D'zimra* serves as a long rendering of praise for the Holy One. This section seeks to uplift the spirit and moreover, honor God by extolling God for the multitude of miracles of creation. Just as in the morning blessings we rejoice in the expression of gratitude to God for the miracle of our bodies, so too can we be uplifted by contemplating the wonders of creation and saying thank you to God in praise and

14. Music by Shefa Gold

song. To praise, to choose to see the beauty of creation, and to say thank you warms the soul and nurtures its capacity to grow greater to the Infinite. The practice of praising, of speaking words infused with gratitude, leads to what Reb Noson describes as a plea to ask God to “help me bind my heart to the words of my mouth . . . Let me pour out my thoughts, my feelings, my prayers and requests to You both in my thoughts feeling, my prayers and requests to You both in words and with all my heart so that my heart will always be bound to my words.”¹⁵ Filling the mouth with blessings, praise, and gratitude for God’s goodness is a worthy attempt to transform our thoughts, words, and deeds. Prayer gives us the opportunity to alter our destinies, to link them up with the Divine, to not simply criticize or eradicate the negative, but to fill our hearts and minds with loving thoughts, feelings and desires. If we criticize ourselves for negative thoughts we create more negative thoughts, but if we replace these thoughts and feelings with positive, God-centered language, we can lift our spirits and create new patterns that take us more deeply into the heart.

Praise has the ability to transform, whether we choose to pray in the traditional manner, to recite the full liturgy of *P’sukei D’zimra* or we choose to abbreviate and practice a more simplified version, each aims to achieve the same: to bind the heart to God through thoughts, words, deeds. In this section, my aim is to deepen the experience of prayer as we ascend toward the *Shema* and the *Amidah*. Building on the tradition and inventing when necessary, these chants and exercises seek to take us deeply into prayer. I have chosen to use a chant like *L’chah Dodi* in order to call forth the different aspects of the Divine into our prayer. I have departed from allowing this section to be only an expression of praise, but feel that it is necessary to invite and invoke the Divine Presence to guide the desires of our hearts and the words of our mouths. Because many of us have not yet built a relationship with the Infinite, these 3 chants incorporate praise but also express the desire for the Holy One, they give us a focal point for the breath of life, and express wonder for God’s creation of us.

15. Reb Noson, *Likutey Tefilot Reb Noson’s Prayers Volume I*, trans. Avraham Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1992), 72.

Both *Hinach Yafa Rayati* and *Niflaim Maasecha*, prayers I include in this section, praise God--yet in praising God we acknowledge our own beauty. Just as it is important for us to see the beauty and wonder in God and the rest of creation, so too is it important for us to know that God sees all of creation in a similar way. By cultivating this notion of beauty and God's love, we allow ourselves to be rejuvenated and regenerated when we imagine that as beautiful and wonderful as God is, God can see a similar beauty within us. This section invites the Divine further into our prayer, it praises us as beautiful and wonderful creations, and gives us an opportunity to allow ourselves the experience of breathing as if we were a part of the soul of every living thing (*Nishmat Kol Chai*).

Unlike the prescribed *Birhot Hashachar*, *Shema*, and *Amidah*, *P'sukei D'zimra* although regularly incorporated as an integral part of the modern prayer service, does not have the status of other parts of the prayer service. Like *Birhot Hashachar* it marks the transition between "the daily secular routine to the sacred act of communal prayer or better said, "the prayer before the prayer."¹⁶ A lengthy section in the traditional prayer book, this part of the service was known as the daily Hallel. More than 5 psalms and two bracketing prayers were necessary parts of this section of prayer. From genizah fragments, we know that throughout Jewish history more psalms and prayers were added. One modern writer says, "the essence of the P'sukei D'zimra is the affirmation within ourselves of the feeling of gratitude and praise for the tenuous mystery of life and the parallel recognition that beyond the mystery of life there lies yet a deeper mystery whom we call God."¹⁷ Our tradition has a very lengthy way of expressing such praise and mystery. Part of the siddur tradition is that one can always add more prayers but one cannot always take them away. Thanks to the Reform and Reconstructionist movement, that obstacle has been removed. The traditional Ashkenazi service includes the following: Psalm 30, *Baruch Sheamar*, Songs of Thanksgiving, Shabbat Psalms which are added to Shabbat and Yom Tov, *Yehi Kivod*,

16. Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Introduction to the Liturgy: Why the P'sukei D'Zimrah?" in *My People's Prayer Book, Volume III*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 5.

17. Ibid, 13.

Hallel (Ashrei: Psalm 84:5, 144:15, 145 and psalms 146-150), *Baruch Hashem L'Olam*, *Vayivarech David*, *Ata Hu Hashem L'Vadecha*, *Az Yashir*, *Nishmat kol Chai* (for Shabbat and Yom Tov only), *Shochein Ad* (Shabbat and Yom Tov), and *Yishtabach*. After such a lengthy list of prayers, it is no wonder the Reform movement greatly pared down these services and that past sages have expressed concern that worshippers rush through this sequence. With so many words to utter in praise of Hashem, how could one possibly have the correct *cavanah*?¹⁸ There is a debate in the Talmud as to whether these prayers are an independent entity or serve mainly as preparation for the rest of the service –both thoughts are supported by the Talmud, however the Tur says that *P'sukei D' zimra* cannot stand alone.¹⁹ The general conclusion is “that Pesukei D’Zimra should be recited in a formal prayer structure with a minyan and a prayer leader, but unlike the sh’ma and the Amidah, it is not required to be done that way.”²⁰

The bulk of this section of the service is comprised of the Hallel and the two benedictions. *Baruch Sheamar* introduces this section and begins with praising and blessing the one who creates and pervades all. The psalms, however, remain the bulk of the traditional service which is loosely inspired by the Levites who sung psalms at the Temple during sacrifices.²¹ Throughout the centuries new psalms have been added. Psalm 30 has been a component of this prayer since the 17th century.²² At the heart of *P'sukei D' zimra* lies *Ashrei*. The sages proclaim that of all the prayers in this portion of the service *Ashrei* is the most important to recite, yet even here it is not obligatory.²³

Before petitioning God for assistance, one must first praise God. *Ashrei*, a psalm of praise, marks the path for the end of times when praise will be the central modality that

18. Ibid, 12.

19. Daniel Landes, “The Twofold Halakhic Status of P’sukei D’zimrah” in *My People’s Prayer Book, Volume III*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 25.

20. Ibid, 26

21. Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 65.

22. Ibid.

23. Rabbi David Brofsky, *Hilchot Tefillah: A Comprehensive Guide to the Laws of Daily Prayer* (New York: Oupress, 2010), 36.

remains. Rabbi Meir Dvinsk states that *Ashrei* underscores how everything in nature is pure providence and therefore we are obligated to acknowledge these miracles on a daily basis:

One should not err and forget that God is the creator, organizer and supervisor of the natural order. One should not think, out of routine, that nature is independent, and one should not separate it from its Creator. Therefore, there are, on occasion, miracles. . . . the purpose of which is to bring the wonders of nature to the attention of mankind, as it is all from His hands and pure providence.

Therefore, those who recite the Great Hallel every day, which indicates that it is only appropriate to acknowledge the miraculous actions of God [as described within], but the natural order once created, is detached from its Creator, are blasphemers. On the other hand, one who recites *Ashrei* daily, which speaks of the natural order, is worthy of the World to Come. . . . That is the significance of the alphabetical arrangement of *Ashrei*, which hints to the natural arrangement of the world, without skipping from alef to tav.²⁴

Thus the praiseworthy psalm articulates the natural order. In order for us to attain the world to come we cannot possibly skip one aspect of the Divine. Paradoxically, even with this assertion, one can still omit or skip both *Ashrei* and *P'sukei D'Zimra* altogether. While the other psalms 146-150 focus on redemption, *Ashrei* encompasses all of nature and its functions.

Because of the lengthy nature of *P'sukei D'zimra* the Reform Movement has sought to reduce and remove many of the traditional elements in part because of its rejection of the mysticism in the liturgy.²⁵ Consequently, while incorporating *Baruch Sheamar* and *Yishtabach*, the framing prayers, and including psalm 146-150 as well as *Ashrei*, the movement has avoided the extensive list that pertains to the traditional practice, yet still fosters a warm-up for the rest of the service. Not surprisingly, the debate arises as to whether we have the right to shorten or alter prayers to suit the community's needs or whether they should stay in their traditional form. This section seems to be the most flexible given that one is not required to recite it in the manner or tradition of *Shema Uvirchotecha*.

In the Contemplative Service I have not included any of the traditional prayers for *P'sukei D'zimra*. The order of the chants/prayers in the service is as follows: *Bo Habayita*,

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

Breathing in place of *Nishmat Col Chai*, *Hinach Yafa Rayati*, and *Niflaim Maasecha*. After establishing the contemplative mood in *Birchot Hashachar*, in this section I aim to intensify the experience as well as focus on an invitation to prayer and recognize the Divine that dwells in each of us that will someday be able to wholly praise the Creator. Rather than focusing on the traditional liturgy I wanted to represent simplified ideas, some original and others found in Scripture that would appeal to individuals and help them to relax into the service. *Hinach Yafah Rayati* and *Niflaim Maasecha* depict a praise of ourselves in part because we are made and gazed upon by God.

While in *Birchot Hashachar*, *Hineini* and *Elohai Neshama* assert our closeness to God through our willingness to be present, *Bo Habayita* invites God into our prayer. This chant came out of a discussion with a friend who had said to me, "It is time for the Jews to come home to God." However, before we can come home to God, first we must be invited into God's home as well as to invite God to dwell within us. This song is a beckoning of God to come home and an imagining that God beckons to us to please come home as well. I imagine this song being sung between God and humanity like two lost friends or brothers, calling each other back to unity. We have been exiled from each other and must call out to each other in order to make the greatest strides toward return. The story of the exile from Eden can be read as not only an exile for humanity, but an exile of God from humanity.

All of our prayers and petitions require that we ask specifically for what we want. In *Bo Habayita* we take the first step toward God and we imagine that God is taking that first step toward us. This prayer assumes that God hears our prayers. Within all prayer is the hope for a reunification between God and humanity, but before we can explain why we may not yet have experienced that unification, we must at least send out our desire to God to request that the Infinite come into our lives and into our prayers. The beginning of our relationship to the Divine is the desire to have that connection. This chant is a call and response between us and God, each asking the other to return home again, home to each other inside the heart. To become more and more connected to God demands courage and humility, and a faith that

whatever the mystery that God is, we must admit that we want and desire this deep connection. If we cannot become vulnerable enough to admit this desire to God, how can we ever expect to be uplifted in prayer? Therefore, this prayer opens the door to other prayer, to desire, to our vulnerability and our willingness to receive something other than the mundane. For the sake of time, I have included only four names of God: (the tetragrammaton, *Adon Olam*, *El Rachaman*, *Shechinah*) though more of God's names could be added. While in Judaism we believe in One God, we also have many names for that one God. Each name represents a different aspect of the Divine, yet all are encompassed in the name Adonai (YKVK). While this chant is not one of praise explicitly, it brings to the forefront the modern desire for connection, the individual's longing for contact with something greater, and in doing so cultivates the humility that the praise of the psalms addresses.

For Nishmat Kol Chai where the liturgy says that "the soul of every living being will praise your name," we turn our attention toward the breath. Here we practice becoming the breath which praises. We place our attention back into the body and focus on becoming that living, breathing thing that can praise God. This interval in the service also serves as a resting space after the momentum building of *Bo Habayita*. The traditional psalm praises the wonder of nature that all beings are pulsing with the power of the One! One day we may fully realize that just like the plants and trees reach toward the sun, will can allow our whole beings, all cells and consciousness to turn toward the One as well. We practice a 5- 7- 5 breathing pattern, a pattern that calms the nervous system and gives the practitioner the opportunity to sit with his own presence, and relax into the environment created by the chanting. In order to give praise, we too must feel that we are receiving. If we feel deprived or that we are simply reciting prayers by rote that we do not understand, then we may feel alienated from each other, from God, and may think that prayer does not work. When we sit, relax, breathe, and express gratitude, we give ourselves the chance to allow the receiving of the Divine. If we put pressure on ourselves that we have to be something, do something, understand something, we frustrate our ability to experience what is right in front of

ourselves in the present moment. The breathing exercises and Nishmat express the natural praise that all creatures express by reveling in their bodies, and in doing so we revel in the creation that is all around us.

The next two chants can be used interchangeably as each represents the wonder at being a part of God's beautiful and magnificent creation. Instead of the many psalms that are typically a part of *P'sukei D'zimra*, I have simplified this section and incorporated Scripture that praises God and also praises our own very specific creation. In this sense, the service requires that praise be both externalized and internalized that we not only express the wonder at the creation all around us, but we also as in Psalm 139 praise our own creation as wondrous and awe inspiring. How often do we relish the beauty of our own form? This component of the service encourages us to acknowledge and celebrate our beauty as divine creations. *Hinach Yafah Rayati* taken from *Song of Songs* and composed by Shefa Gold, translates as "how beautiful you are my friend, how beautiful." I introduce this song by situating it within the *Song of Songs* and by explaining that the rabbis view this book of the Bible as a love song between God and Israel. Also, I encourage the participants to imagine that God is looking down at each one of us with a loving gaze, like a beloved with his lover, or a parent with a child: "how beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful!" First I ask them to sit basking in the loving gaze of the Divine and to take it all in. Then I suggest that in a few minutes as we are chanting and after we have sat receiving this love emanating from the Divine, we can open our eyes and look at another in the room, welcoming them and saying to them, "How beautiful you are my friend, how beautiful." Oftentimes people will open their eyes and look at one another—since this service does not include a place for people to meet each other, this is a good time to extend a greeting.

The alternative prayer for this section, *Niphla'im Maasecha*, taken and adapted from Psalm 139 where the Psalmist says "You are very wonderful: I praise you for I am awesomely wondrously made!" Instead of the Psalms praising God for God's redemptive power, I have inserted a slightly different trope, one that like a toddler exalts in its own

creation saying, "God you are great, I praise you, for my own body, mind and spirit are a miracle of your creation!"

Along with the traditional *P'sukei D'zimra*, this section of the service intensifies the warm-up that began with *Birchot Hashachar*. Step by step we have ascended closer and closer to the sacred first by sanctifying the space, through centering ourselves in meditation, by acknowledging that we are present and willing to respond to the call, by inviting the Divine into the room, by affirming the purity of the soul and many blessings of simply being alive, by coming into the holiness of the breath, and by praising God and celebrating our own creation. My hope at this point in the service is that we are ready to enter an even deeper state of prayer. Now we may seek the oneness that resides at the center of our service. We have warmed up our hearts are ready to affirm the Oneness that resides in all things.

Shema Uvirchotecha

Ten B'Libeinu²⁶
Give to Our Hearts

תן בלבנו
Ten b'libeinu

26. Words and Lyrics by Sara Abrams (inspired by Ahava Raba)

Give to our hearts . . .

Eternal Love
Ten b'libeinu
To know Your ways
Ten b'libeinu
To grasp Your thoughts
Ten b'libeinu
To hear Your words
Ten b'libeinu . . .

To open our hearts
To calm our minds
To ease our pain
To increase our joy

Meditation

Yichud²⁷
יְחִיד יְחִיד יְחִיד
הוּא אֶחָד

Yachid Yichud Yachid
Hu Echad

God is all that is.
God is one.

Shema

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד.
בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ
לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

Shema Yis'ra'eil
Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.
Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va'ed.

27. Music and lyrics by Sara Abrams

Blessed is God's sovereignty for ever and ever.
Hear, Oh Israel: Adonai is our God,
Adonai is One!

V'Ahavta

With all your heart and all your soul, love Me (2x)
With all your might and all your power, love Me (2x)

Take these words which I command you, Adonai
Place them in your heart, Adonai
Teach them to your children, Adonai
In all your waking hours, Adonai

With all your heart . . .

When you're sitting in your home, Adonai
When you're walking on your way, Adonai
When you lie down to sleep, Adonai
When you wake up in the morning, Adonai
With all your heart . . .

Wrap this sign upon your hand, Adonai
Bind these truths between your eyes, Adonai
Write these words upon your doorposts, Adonai
Inscribe them on your gates, Adonai

With all your heart . . .

Explanation

If *Birchot Hashachar* and *Psukei D'zimra* are the warm-ups of the traditional prayer service, here in this contemplative practice, the six words of the *Shema* are the pinnacle. A modified service with a meditative *Amidah* and no Torah service, the Contemplative Service peaks in intensity during the *Shema* and its blessings. The earlier prayers have sent out an invitation to the Divine and have readied us for the experience of oneness, rather than just the praise of it. We have spent the past half hour slowly opening up to the possibility that the Divine can be experienced, we have sought it out, called to it, relished in its gaze and are

now ready to not only sing its praises but to grasp the oneness itself. As stated in previous sections, the service has sought to simplify the language of prayer while embracing traditional theology in order to facilitate a spiritual experience of the Divine through our intention and invitation. Most important is not the order of the prayers or their traditional arrangement, but whether through them we can feel uplift, inspiration, and our emotions. The aim is not to fulfill the *Halacha* or the traditional approach, but to seek a sense of unity together and beyond. Recent Reform trends in prayer have been to reincorporate Hebrew into the liturgy, which often leaves congregants not understanding the prayer at all. In my rendition of *Ahava Raba*, *V'ahavta*, and the English translation of the preparation to the *Shema*, *Yichud*, each seeks to emphasize the very theology that our tradition asserts: God listens, God is one, and God commands us to love God.

Our liturgy provides a ready arc for this ascent into the heavens that the *Shema* and its blessings foster. Along with the declaration of God's oneness (the *Shema*), come the blessings before and after. This service emphasizes the ongoing creation of light, divine love, and the oneness that pervades the universe. The two blessings that precede the *Shema*, *Yotzer* and *Ahava Raba*, colored by mystical images and praise for the love that God has given us, provide a graduated ascent into the proclamation. In *Yotzer* the sages praise God for the creation of light and darkness and in *Ahava Raba* they praise God for the love that God has given to humanity through Torah and *mitzvot*. In return, the *Shema* explains that we must love God with all that we have. Since much of our lives are an experience of being separate from God and the rest of humanity, these prayers seek to provide us with the daily assurance of the opposite: that we are intrinsically connected to the Eternal through love. While Judaism may shy away from speaking about God's love for us for fear of sounding like Christianity, in the prayers of the *Shema* and its blessings, one finds ample evidence that not only does God love us, but that we should spend our lives loving God. The *V'ahavta* reminds us that this love should be expressed through our words, actions, and deeds. Where the *Shema* asserts the truth of God's oneness, the *V'ahavta* informs us where that oneness

dwells—in everything we have—and the emotion with which we should treat it: love. Even as Reform Jews who may not follow all of the *mitzvot*, we can still incorporate a love for God that permeates our consciousness and our bodies. This love can begin to take root through our longing for a different experience of life that infuses our beings with the Divine.

The traditional liturgy of the *Shema* is composed of 5 parts. The *Shema* and its blessings is among the oldest set of prayers that we have and may have been recited in the Temple.²⁸ The first of these 5 is not so much a blessing but a call to prayer, the “*Barchu*.” Next comes a series of blessings, two which precede the *Shema* and one that follows it. Enconced in this rubric are the three miracles of life on earth for the Jew: Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. *Yotzer* begins the blessings, followed by *Birkat Hatorah* (*Ahava Raba*), then the *Shema* with its 3 Biblical readings (Deut. 6:4-9, Deut. 11:13-21, Numb. 14:37-41), and *G'ullah* (*Michah Mocha*). Research suggests that the *Shema* is recited twice a day and “it brackets each day as it brackets an individual’s life” since it is also the last prayer said on one’s deathbed.²⁹

Although Judaism does not have a central creed, if it were to have one it would likely be the *Shema* and its blessings, an affirmation of God, the cosmology, and our relationship to the Torah. It also formally marks the beginning of the service. Whereas *Birhot Hashachar* and *Psukei D'zimra* are wonderful warm-ups to prayer, they are not required in the sense of obligatory prayer. However, we are obligated to say the *Shema* twice daily according to Jewish law (Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah* 1). One can ignore the poetic warm-up of praise, but not the twice daily proclamation of God’s oneness. In essence, the *Shema* marks the beginning of Jewish prayer, while the other sections of the service heighten our awareness in order to be most present for the declaration of the most present.

Although the warm-up has been provided with *Birhot Hashachar* and *P'sukei D'zimra*, the *Shema* has also been bracketed and built up by the themes of creation,

28. Lawrence A. Hoffman, “Introduction to the Liturgy: What to Look for in the Service” in *My People’s Prayer Book Volume I*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), 20.

29. *Ibid.*

revelation, and redemption. The *Barchu* calls the people to prayer and *Yotzer* praises creation and the separation of darkness from light. *Yotzer* praises God's work, the ongoing creation of the earth and all its creatures. The *Kedusha*, found only in the *Amidah* in Reform prayer books, includes a description of the angels of the upper realms praising God's sovereignty on earth. The Reformers rejected this mystical text here, but retained it in the *Kedushah* in the *Amidah*. David Ellenson writes, "Reformers did not like the angelic texts; they objected to angelology; and were firmly against the mystical tradition."³⁰ Thus they omitted this *Kedusha* from the *Shema Uvirchotecha*. Yet these lines of praise create a glorious picture of the rapture of the heavenly hosts and model for humanity as to how to praise God:

Kriyat Sh'ma" the "recitation of the Sh'ma" which humans do on earth thus parallels the angelic kriyat kedushah, so to speak, a "recitation of the kedushah in Heaven. Humans who experience earthly dominion, conceptualize God as supreme king; angels, who are holy beings, think of God as "most holy." Each species, humans and angels, accepts God's rule from its own perspective.³¹

Thus *Yotzer* not only praises God for creation and separation of light from darkness, but engages in a metaphysical journey where we on earth become similar to the angels. The angels are God's messengers and the Talmud states that "Every word emanating from God creates an angel" (*Talmud Bavli*, Chagigah, 14a). Because the angels traverse from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm and back, they are the means through which the Infinite communicates with humanity. As messengers they must praise the one who created them.³² We have a role on earth parallel to God's angels. As the angels sing their praises in *Yotzer*, so too should we:

Be blessed our rock, our ruler and redeemer, creator of holy beings, your name be praised forever, our ruler, who formed his servants, the servants who all stand high

30. David Ellenson, "Yotzer" in *My People's Prayer Book Volume I*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), 61.

31. Lawrence Hoffman "Yotzer" in *My People's Prayer Book Volume I*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), 63.

32. Aryeh, Kaplan, *Inner Space* (Jerusalem: Monzaim Publishing Company, 1991), 31.

above the world, reverently and with one voice reciting the words of the living God, the eternal ruler. They are all beloved; they are all pure; they are all mighty; and they all carry out their creator's will with awe and reverence. They open their mouths with holiness and purity, with poetry and song, and bless, praise, glorify and adore, sanctify and exalt the name of God, great and awesome ruler, the Holy One.

What follows is the *Kedushah* of *Yotzer*. In the traditional *Yotzer* we are to take inspiration by the angels' praises and willingness to glorify God. Here too, as they praise above, so we too praise below. Because God continually creates light—we continually praise the Creator of that light.

The next blessing that precedes the *Shema* is *Ahava Raba*, whose evening counterpart is *Ahavat Olam*. Here the liturgy praises God for the abundant love that God has shared with us through giving us the Torah, *mitzvot* etc. . . In *Yotzer* we praise God's creation, but in *Ahava Raba* we praise revelation and the demonstration of God's great care for us. Here God takes on the role of teacher and father. In the first part of the prayer we praise God for giving us the Torah and trusting us with the law. In the second part the prayer petitions God to draw us nearer to God. We also ask for peace for the world and extol God as one who "chooses his people Israel with love."

The three paragraphs of the *Shema* assert much of Jewish theology. The six words of the *Shema* assert the importance of hearing the words of God. Thus Judaism which proclaims "Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One" asserts not only that God is one but that God speaks to us through words of Torah. Because *Ahava Raba* precedes the *Shema*, the liturgy suggests that God's oneness includes the authorship, the giving of the Torah, and the choice of Israel to receive it. God's oneness includes all sides of reality and we are commanded to listen and speak in order to affirm that God is the only ruler, there are no others.³³ In ancient times, the *Shema* was "not merely read; it was proclaimed . . . In this way the verse became not merely a familiar ritual phrase but as if it were being heard for the first time . . . as if it had never been heard before."³⁴ In this way the *Shema* was a repetition and

33. Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer* (New York; Schocken Books, 1995), 129.

34. Ibid.

reenactment of the revelation at Sinai. At Sinai all gathered around to hear the revelation and to pledge their allegiance and loyalty to God, their king.³⁵ In this moment of revelation, one traditionally closes one's eyes in order to focus one's *cavanah* solely on God. As we complete the recitation we read the following three paragraphs of the *Shema*, which instruct us on how to both love God and to serve God. The first paragraph enumerates how to love God in everything we do, in every place we go, and emphasizes that we need to teach these words to our children. The second paragraph carefully spells out the need to keep the commandments and articulates the rewards and punishments that will be meted out depending on the strength of one's faithfulness and obedience. This paragraph has been omitted from the Reform prayer book while the 3rd paragraph which speaks about the *tzitzit* on the tallit has been included. These texts explain the way in which Israel must listen by loving God with heart and soul and fulfill the commandments in order to reap the rewards. In spite of the harsh 2nd paragraph, the prime motivation of the prayer is to affirm God's existence and oneness and proclaim God as "the very essence of all being." Accompanying the recitation are many rabbinic discussions of what kind of *cavanah* one must have in order to focus and properly recite the *Shema* and its blessings. While I will not include those examples here, there are many arguments made in the Talmud regarding both the time of recitation and how one should recite it, particularly if one is already busy at work. Such discussions illustrate the crucial meaning the pronouncement of the *Shema* holds for the tradition.

The blessing that follows the *Shema* is *Geulah* which serves as the redemptive section of the *Shema* and the final blessing which concludes this section of prayer. In this prayer, we thank and praise God for redeeming and freeing us from slavery in Egypt. By recalling the feats that God has performed for Israel, the acceptance of God's kingship and how God is the provider of Israel's salvation, this prayer (*Geulah*) celebrates the wonder of this miracle of liberation. In fact the *Shema* and its blessings have taken us through the key events of the

35. Ibid.

biblical journey of the Israelites from the universalism of creation to the specificity of revelation through Torah, and the miracle of redemption through the exodus from Egypt. All three of these purposes continually occur in present time, light and darkness are continually created, God's love for us revealed through law and learning, as well as continual miracle of freedom and its potentiality continually redeems us.

As in other parts of this service, in this section I have also omitted, reduced and simplified some of the prayers in order to make them more accessible to the congregants and to emphasize a particular aspect of the prayer's theology. The rubric of Jewish prayer traditionally offers few organized moments for personal or spontaneous prayer. In this service thus far I have included a spontaneous *Nisim B'Chol Yom*, where participants can share what they are personally thankful for. In *Ten B'libeinu*, I have adapted a line from *Birkat Hatorah (Ahava Raba)* which asks that the Holy One give to our hearts the ability to understand, to grasp, to hear. The melody consists of simply saying *Ten B'libeinu* intermittently with different phrases of what we would like God to give to our hearts. At the beginning of the prayer I inform congregants that we will recite the list included and after that whether silently or out loud they can share their own personal petition. The first three petitions are inspired by Ahava Raba: "To know Your ways, to grasp Your thoughts, to hear Your words." At first congregants are sometimes shy to share their prayers, but if we continue to chant *Ten B'libeinu* eventually people step forward to share their personal desires. This prayer petitions as well as praises. It asks that God gives to our hearts and minds the ability to grasp, understand and hear, and also requests that God gather us in peace from the corners of the earth. This petition also conjures up a longing for God to grace us with what we need. While on Shabbat one does not traditionally petition God, this adaptation offers the opportunity to teach people how to pray. As a group we acknowledge that we need help to grow. Congregants add words like "patience, forgiveness, the release of fear, healthy lives etc. . . ." Many times people feel an emotional release during this prayer,

some congregants become weepy as they open their hearts desire to God and experience their vulnerability.

Traditionally, as I have explained in the previous section, *Yotzer* (creation) comes before *Ahava Raba* (revelation). In the service I have reversed their order. Creation must come before revelation, but given that in this service *Ahava Raba* is a petition and *Yotzer* a meditation, I felt that it made the most sense to place the meditation on the light prior to the *Shema*. The meditation seeks to calm and connect us to the creative light all around us and enhances the experience of the oneness that will come in the next chant and the *Shema*. The meditation also offers a more intense approach to strengthening one's *cavanah*. Since God creates light, in this meditation we imagine the divine light coming through the crown of the head and flowing into the body. This idea of flow and influx is central to Kabbalah, that through the vessel of the body and its heavenly aspects we can experience the radiance of the One. Our hope is to access the light within the body in order to heighten our experience of the divine. We begin by deepening the breath and straightening the spine. After a few breaths we turn our attention to the crown of the head and I then ask participants to imagine a white light traveling from the crown of the head, running down through the throat and heart, filling the inner organs and then flowing through the legs. Instead of reading about the illumination of the world and all its inhabitants, we seek to taste a little bit of that illumination through the power of *cavanah*, and allowing our bodies and minds to be receptive. This meditation allows us to imagine God as immanent, as light that is palpable not only in vision in the rest of the senses. In keeping with the angelic description of the traditional *Yotzer*, we imagine that we too are ascending ever higher, becoming lighter in order to take in the influx of the Holy One.

According to *Yotzer*, God continually creates the light. If so, then we can continually receive it, not only in our visual sphere but in the energetic one as well. As we take in the light we feel more and more a part of the oneness that pervades all things. We have opened ourselves as vessels for light through our entire bodies, and we have asked to receive love

and guidance through our hearts. We are now ready to invite and proclaim the oneness of God.

The next chant, “*Yichud*” serves as a precursor and preparatory chant for the proclamation of the *Shema*. An original chant, this melody came to me after I had been thinking about the connections of the root letters in the words *Yachid*, *Yichud*, and *Echad*. How interesting that in Hebrew the singular (*yachid*) shares the same root as unity (*yichud*). In fact, without the vowels *yachid* and *yichud* are nearly the same word. How does the One who is infinite, enter into the individual, the singular? From the Biblical viewpoint, when God created the world he infused everything with God’s essence. Therefore all beings, who seem so separate and singular, contain within them the unity that derives from the ultimate oneness. Just as the wave arises from and returns to the ocean, so too do our spirits arise from the vast expanse of the One. They arise and return back to the source and then surface once again back into individuation. Because of the shared root of *yachid*, *yichud*, and *echad*, translating it literally diminishes the poetry. Instead, for the English I employed words that caught the meaning and foreshadowed the *Shema*. The English says, “God is all that is” and “God is one.” The use of English brings participants closer to the genuine meaning behind the *Shema*, and the repetitive chanting as well as the melody enact the ongoing interplay of how the One moves into the many (the unity into the singular).

The *Shema*-oriented theme of *Yichud* leads quite naturally into the chanting of the traditional *Shema*. As soon as “*Yichud*” concludes, I say, “one word, one breath.” The community chants the *Shema* and whispers the 2nd line. Through *Ten B’libeinu*, the meditation on the light, *Yichud* and the earlier warm-ups during *Birchot Hashachar*, the *Shema* becomes a dramatic pronouncement of God’s oneness that can be felt as well as spoken.

I have removed the second and third paragraphs of the *Shema* both out of a need to simplify the service and because their theology does not add to the service’s contemplative focus. In place of the typical chanting in Hebrew or reciting in English, I have included a

new version of an English *Vahavta* that emphasizes “You shall love.” As I have stated above in previous sections, often the Hebrew conceals from our communities the meaning of the prayers. Thus when congregants hear the prayers translated into English and hear the word God, some of them are shocked and uncomfortable. This *V'ahavta* addresses this concern, for it makes clear the point and importance of this most central prayer. The refrain is, “With all your heart and all your soul, love me (2x) With all your might and all your power, love me (2x).” What are we commanded to do, as we teach our children, as we rise up and lie down, as we go about our business? Love God. Moreover, we should take these words, “Love me” and place them in our hearts, as signs upon our hand and as frontlets between our eyes. This prayer speaks of the will and desire to love God, to take that which cannot be defined and to place it in your heart, in your mind, on your arm and to share it with your descendants. The meaning behind the prayer is made explicit by the refrain, “Love me.”

Since the *Shema* and its blessings serve as the peak moment of this service, the rest of the service is a coming down from this ascent. In this version of the Contemplative service I have included a sitting *Amidah*, however the *Shema* is the most central prayer in this particular liturgical layout. In these moments, we seek to experience that Oneness. After its recitation, we use the rest of the service as a chance to slowly descend from the intensity of that moment.

Amidah

Amidah³⁶

This is the time to offer
yourself to the Eternal

You are the purest gift, a korban, sent here to grow close to the Holy One

36. Written by Sara Abrams

Imagine your heart as residing in the heart of God
Breathe slowly into the heart, and let each breath expand its fibers

God has been with you since before conception
God's love for you is rooted in eternity
It hearkens back to your ancestors
Let that love anchor you down you to the center of the earth

Allow your body to relax and
the heart to fill with the majesty of the Infinite One
Allow your lips to turn upward toward heaven
Above your head envision a radiant light

This is God's light.
Rest there in the Kedusha, the holiness of the One of the universe
Surrender your thoughts to the light
Bask in the warmth of the Infinite One
Let your breath be your guide
Offer your gratitude as a blessed child of the Holy One

Explanation

Let my prayers rise up to the greatest heights. Give me the power to arouse the Upper Eden through my prayers, so as to open up a flowing channel of love, supreme wisdom, and Godly knowledge. Let the emerging river flow down to water the Garden—The Torah—which is where our souls are rooted. Let my soul grow and blossom. Let the pathways of the intellect be truly open to me, and bring me to attain wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.³⁷

Where does prayer end and meditation begin? Is there a difference or do our prayers, supplications and yearnings contribute to the cultivation of the heart, the silencing of the mind and the opening of the spirit? In prayer we seek to be uplifted, transported into a higher consciousness or at the very least to nurture a sensitivity to and resonance with the sacred. We take a step out of the mundane and into the emotional and spiritual depth that accompanies us at all times. Where is the oasis for man to meet his God? In the traditional

37. Reb Noson, *Likutey Tefilot Reb Noson's Prayers Volume I*, trans. Avraham Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1992), 173.

service, the *Amidah*, the standing prayer offers us that pinnacle moment. Here is where the communal prayer recedes into the background and the individual presents an offering. Although many of the blessings in the *Shemoneh Esreh* express the plural, the main intention of the prayer is to offer a place from which the suppliant can open his heart, a space of personal dialogue with the Divine, and a way to petition for the many conditions that we as humans perceive we need. Because the Contemplative Service primarily focusses on the *Shema*, revelation, the *Amidah* takes a secondary place in contrast to the pinnacle moment it provides in the traditional service. Here, the pronouncement of the *Shema* remains the focal point. We seek an alternative to the separation that we experience on a day to day basis, a space to merge together to pronounce the oneness and unity of all creation. Our supplication, traditionally found in the *Amidah*, has shifted to the *Shema*. The *Amidah* then, becomes more of an offering than a petition to the Holy One. During the buildup to the *Shema*, we have praised the Eternal, grown quieter, petitioned through the song *Ten B'Libeinu*, so that by the time we arrive at the *Amidah* it is the culmination of the earlier prayers and the celebration of the Holy One.

On Shabbat, one traditionally does not petition God during the *Amidah*, given that it is the day of rest not only for us but for God. Given the openness of the service, however, should a person need to petition God for something specific, this meditation offers the space in which to do so.

Because this service does not include the Torah service that typically follows the Shabbat *Amidah*, the *Amidah* section acts as the beginning of a quiet denouement of the service. Set after the *Shema*, the *Amidah* permits us to begin to conclude the service first through the silence of this meditation, and then through the subsequent prayer for peace, *Aleinu*, and *Kaddish*. In this section of the service we allow our hearts to present their profound gratitude for the shelter of God's presence throughout all time. The earlier sections of the service, the praise of *Birchot Hashachar* and the pronouncement of God's oneness, have prepared us for the gratitude expressed in the *Amidah*. We have shifted our mundane

everyday awareness into the possibility of an exalted experience of the divine presence in our world and in our bodies. Just as we used to offer up to God the perfect offering at the Temple, in this section of the service we offer up our own selves, knowing that our consciousness and intent are the perfect offerings for God. As Reb Nachman states: “we must arouse the upper Eden” so that it may flow more powerfully into our world and the vessels which are our bodies.

As discussed earlier in this commentary, the rabbis created the prayer service as a staircase, an ascension to the Holy. The *Amidah* as well as the Torah service provide a pinnacle experience for this ascension. The exact history of the *Amidah* is not quite clear in terms of how it arose and made it into the rubric of prayer. We do know that the rabbis considered the *Amidah* as the *Tefillah*, the highest expression of prayer. There is no mention of the *Amidah* in the Bible and the only kind of communal prayer mentioned there was the sacrificial cult.³⁸ While synagogues in the diaspora surely had methods of worship prior to the destruction of the Second Temple, the exile from Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple fostered a need for an alternative to sacrificial worship. Where the daily *Tamid* offering had been given twice a day, now the rabbis instituted prayer in its place, even adding a third service, *Maariv*, that did not correspond to the Temple offering. There is much debate as to how the *Amidah* became a part of the canon of prayer. Records of it exist within the Mishnah and it is thought that Rabban Gamaliel, the first patriarch, compiled the first version of the *Amidah* and its 19 prayers. The Mishnah mentions the men of the Great Assembly as commissioning and authoring the *Amidah*, but it is likely that it came from the voices redacted in the Mishnah itself. It was likely that this the Great Assembly never existed at all but was created later to lend credence to the creation of the *Amidah* by the rabbis of the period.³⁹ Gamaliel, however is said to have mandated the arrangement of the prayers. Before this mandate the prayers were likely said in a different order and with different additions and

38. Lawrence Hoffman “How the Amidah Began” in *My People’s Prayer Book Volume II*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 18.

39. Ibid.

insertions than we have today, but Gamaliel, along with the other rabbis in this era, wanted to create a standard way of worship that could take the place of the Temple cult. Gamaliel advocated for the fixed petitions encoded in the *Amidah* and ultimately his argument won. Yet this argument was debated by Rabbi Eliezer who asserted that these petitions should be spontaneous, and provide a place for each person to pray his prayer without fixed rules of recitation. Although Rabbi Eliezer lost out to Rabbi Gamaliel, his argument touches on the many problems on having a central prayer which incorporates petition, but denies the worshiper his own petition and requires him to recite the words designated by rabbis, Gamaliel and other predecessors that may not fit the desires of his heart.

Since Jews refer to the *Amidah* as “the Prayer,” it holds a critical place in the service for the supplicant as he seeks to open his heart to God. The tension between fixed and spontaneous prayer has always existed, and with the daily *Amidah*, R. Gamaliel’s ruling has insured its fixed status. The daily *Amidah* begins with praise of God through the paragraphs of the *Avot*, *Gevurot*, and *Kedushah* and includes a series of petitions, and then concludes with *Avodah*, Thanksgiving and a prayer for peace. On Shabbat and holidays we traditionally only include seven of the daily sections. The daily blessings are a mixture of personal and national petitions. As with other prayers, the personal is experienced through the communal. The *Amidah* begins with the admonition, “*Adonai sephatai tiftach*” recited by David in Psalm 51, which implies that God helps us to pray:

We are as it were dumb when we want to address God. We need God’s help in what we are about to do. Prayer, in other words, is not the utterance of the person praying, as a subject, to God as object. Prayer is rather the interaction of the person praying with God. For prayer to work, God has to want to help us to pray as much as we want to pray.⁴⁰

Prayer is assisted by God and completed by God. To enter into prayer in this way nearly erases the duality of God and humanity while at the same time asserting that difference. By aligning our will with God’s will, we allow God to pray through us and thus honor God’s

40. Mark Brettler “Opening Meditation” in *y People’s Prayer Book Volume II*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 52.

divinity through the multiple ways God appears and expresses Godself, or as Rabbi Kushner says, “My mouth is God’s mouth, my praises are God’s words. Not only does God hear our words, God prays them through us as well.”⁴¹ In this sense when our hearts and minds open to God—we enter into the sacred. We surrender ourselves and ideally allow the Divine Presence to dwell inside of us.

The *Amidah* begins with *Avot*, which affirms our relationship and covenant through God via our lineage. It asserts God’s promises and the blessings that were bestowed in the past as given by a great and supreme God who creates and protects, gives redemption, helps and assists. This prayer praises God in order to remind God of God’s covenant with us: “we are not mere strangers and we hope that God will remember us.” Reform and other progressive movements have added the foremothers to this blessing which previously only included the blessings over the forefathers. The second blessing, *Gevurot*, describes God’s power in the world and includes themes of resurrection and the bringing of the messianic age. Resurrection of the dead was a controversial topic for the early Reformers but has been re-included as an option in *Mishkan T’filah*. Kushner writes that “*M’chayeh Meitim*” suggests that “those of us who are spiritually dead may be brought back to life.” This paragraph emphasizes the glory of God, God’s power and might and the miracles which occur under God sovereignty and well as asserts the survival of the soul after the body dies.

In *Kedushat Hashem* we praise God’s holiness and exhibit “the human desire to parallel the divine retinues’ act of sanctifying God.”⁴² If the angels constantly sing God’s praises, “Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh” sanctifying the Divine and praising the holiness so too do we (Isaiah 6:3). In effect, we join in the heavenly chorus by sanctifying the Divine and praising the One who fills all the world with God’s presence. The 3 holies represent the attributes of God: holiness in heaven, on earth, and throughout all time. This joining together of heavenly and human voices celebrates God’s utter holiness in heaven and in the world.

41. Lawrence Kushner, *Ibid.* 53.

42. *Ibid.*

The rest of the prayer occurs under God's sovereignty and as well asserts how the God of Israel reigns supreme forever.

Because the *Amidah* in the traditional service marks the pinnacle of worship, it is also marked by a sacred posture that helps to open the heart, center the mind, and relax the body. In the pursuit of locating an embodied Jewish spiritual practice, the *Amidah* offers some surprisingly beautiful rituals that have been excluded not only from Reform contemporary practice but also from more traditional services and prayer customs. While Reform Judaism has reincorporated some of the ceremonial postures and davening habits understood as *Halacha* with regard to the *Amidah*, there are many that have not been incorporated. Increasingly, Reform Jews step forward and backward in the appropriate places during the *Amidah*. Some rituals currently not incorporated could add a needed embodied component to contemporary prayer. These rituals have Talmudic and Mishnaic sources. Of particular interest regarding the movements of the body during the *Amidah* is the command to bring both hands over the heart and bow the head during prayer. With the advent of the siddur (and the printing press), the movement of the hands must have been erased from regular practice. Whereas in times before the popularity of siddur use, one had his hands free to pray as such, in modern times one's hands are occupied by the weighty siddur.

The origins of the covering of the heart by the hands in prayer can be found in a story about the prayer practices of Raba in the Talmud. This custom was not a part of the Mishnah, rather it was written in the Gemara. In this excerpt from the Talmud, the rabbis are having a discussion about how one should dress and how one should stand during prayer. They recounted the way Raba and Rav Kahana used to pray:

R Sheshet demurred: Is it any trouble to remove the girdle! moreover, let him stand thus [ungirdled] and pray?---Because it is said, "prepare to meet God, O Israel." Raba son of R. Huna put on stockings and prayed, quoting, "prepare to meet . . . "Raba removed his cloak, clasped his hands and prayed, saying, [I pray] like a slave before his master. ' R. Ashi said: I saw R. Kahana, when there was trouble in the world, removing his cloak, clasp his hands, and pray, saying "[I pray] like a slave

before his master.” When there was peace, he would put it on, cover and enfold himself and pray, quoting, “Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel” (*Talmud Bavli*, Shabbat 10a).

The Gemara recounts the prayer practice of two leading rabbis. Although they were not dressed fully, they prepared to meet God in prayer by clasping their hands saying “I pray like a slave before his master.” While the verse says nothing explicitly about placing the hands over the heart nor bowing the head, the line “slave before his master” implies subservience. Just as before a king one lowers his head and bows, so too before one’s master does one exhibit humility. The clasping of hands does not necessarily indicate the touching of the heart, but one can imagine that the clasping of the hands takes place at heart level.

Maimonides records the custom of the hand over heart in the *Mishneh Torah*. His explanation is more explicit than that written in the Talmud. In this section he summarizes the way one should hold himself during Tefilah:

He should set his eyes downwards as if he is looking at the ground, and his heart upwards as if he is standing in Heaven. His hands should be resting on his heart, with the right hand clasped over the left hand. He should stand like a servant before his master, in fear, awe, and dread. He should not rest his hand on his hips [during the *Amidah*]. (Maimonides, *Hilchot Tefilah*, Chapter 5, Halacha 4).

While I am not analyzing the text about the heart toward heaven, including it helps us to understand the posture of the davener as well as the position of the heart when he clasps it. Maimonides gives further direction about how the hands should be clasped. The right hand should cover the left as he rests both of them on his heart. The line, “he should stand like a servant before his master in fear, awe and dread” suggests that Maimonides emphasizes the type of relationship a man should have with God during prayer as well as the descriptive *midot* that one should attain. The image of the heart lifted, the head bowed, and the hands placed on the heart, not only conjures up an image of humility but also seems to have a centering affect on the supplicant.

A Sephardic mystic and scholar, Rabbi Ben Ish Hai includes a similar take on the custom with mostly identical language, but he adds some nuance that furthers the dimension of this custom:

... and one should bow one's head slightly—but not too much—in order that one should look down to the ground; one's heart, however, should be focused to heaven. One's hands should be held over one's heart with the right hand placed over the left (if one is not holding the siddur), with the thumbs hidden in the palm of the (left) hand, and one should stand like a servant before a king, in awe and fear. (Ben Ish Hai, Yitro, 204).

Ben Ish Hai first published this book in 1897. In the parenthesis Ben Ish Hai explains that this is the hand position to take if one does not have a siddur which emphasizes that the use of the siddur is now widespread. Also he specified an even more exact position for the hands. In addition to the right hand resting over the left on the heart, one should hide the thumbs underneath the palms of the left hand. Neither the Talmud, Caro, or Maimonides implies such specificity. One might speculate that the right hand should be dominant over the left since the right in Jewish mysticism represents the masculine spiritual aspects of God, verses the left more judgment-oriented aspects of God. The rabbis give this motion importance, and without siddurim, people must have wondered what to do with their bodies when encountering the Holy One. The siddur today can distract us from this very question, our hands-- the most fine motor oriented parts of our bodies-- can be occupied by the text and the very weight of the siddur. In previous eras the shaliach tzibur led the prayer and congregants fulfilled the commandment by saying, "Amen." Ben Ish Hai gives us the most transparent reason for the absence of this custom in both Orthodox and Liberal synagogues. Since today most Jews have access to siddurim, their hands are not free to hold their hearts. While we gained the siddur and discovered a way to occupy our hands (in addition to facilitating congregational participation), we have lost the connection to our hearts. What greater way to connect with God than through the heart, but given recent interest in Jewish spirituality, praying the *Amidah* with the hands on the heart and the head bowed toward the

earth might be a fulfilling and spiritually satisfying experience. Such a stance cultivates humility, stimulates comfort (scientists have proven that placing one's hand on the heart stimulates the production of oxytocin, the bonding hormone), as well as directing one's heart in terms of *cavanah*. I also think this stance, with the eyes closed as later Codes suggest, promotes the inner journey and the personal experience of the Divine. So many progressive Jews may not even know what they are reading during the Amidah, but to touch is to feel, and anyone-- no matter how literate --can do that. To touch one's heart is to encourage prayer from the heart, and in touching it to realize the possibility of being touched in prayer, making contact with the interior (our souls), and ultimately with God.

In the Contemplative Service I seek to incorporate some of the embodiment described above even if we do not stand and recite as we do in the traditional version. Based on the first 3 blessings of the *Amidah*, I have inserted language and themes which resonate with the themes found in *Avot*, *Gevurot*, and the *Kedushah*. Although the posture of the *Amidah* invokes the mystical and the embodiment so the prayer, the meditation attempts to integrate these mystical and historical themes as well. Just as the *Amidah* is said to take the place of the *Tamid* offering at the Temple, here in this meditation, our very selves become the offering. Here we offer ourselves as the service's *Amidah* mediation suggests as "the purest gifts, a korbon, sent here to grow close to the Holy One." Here we imagine this offering of the heart as "residing in the heart of God." The meditation encourages us to breathe into the heart and let it expand. We are allowing God's prayer to come through us. In this first section of the meditation, instead of petitioning God to open our lips, we ask God instead to open our hearts. In the next paragraph we invoke *Avot V'imahot* by saying, "God's love for you is rooted in eternity; It hearkens back to your ancestors; Let that love anchor you down into the center of the earth." We link the *Avot* through these words which remind us of the ancient covenant through which God has accompanied us from eternity into eternity—all of our ancestors, our entire lineage connects us to the Source. The second paragraph reflects

Gevurot in the terms of the majesty and the might of the Holy One in order that we open up to the light of the Holy One. The Avot helps to settle us onto the earth and puts us into connection with our lineage, the Gevurot is about the power of God, the place in us at the solar plexus where we experience our own power. From this place we imagine the radiant light of the Holy One surrounding us. The *Kedushah* represents the holiness and ascension into an angelic state where we pronounce God's holiness which permeates the world. To this we surrender not only in words but in our thoughts enjoying the light and radiance of the divine presence. From this place of openness and light we can offer up our personal prayer that the radiance of the Holy One infuse our lives. As with the traditional service, we conclude our contemplation with a prayer for peace and a prayer that the light that we have received will be extended to all of Israel and all of humanity.

Aleinu

Aleinu

On that day, on that day,
On that day we will know Your name.

And Your name will be One, and Your name will be One
And Your name will be One
and Your name is One

Ush'mo echad ush'mo echad (4x)

Explanation

During the *Amidah* we reach our highest ascent. Subsequently, the service winds down and concludes with the *Aleinu* and then later, *Kaddish*. The build-up to *Kedusha* leads the individual and community into a space of unity with God. The service builds to this pinnacle moment. Having begun with blessings, praise, the pronouncement of oneness and the heightened moment of prayer from the heart that is the *Amidah*, the *Aleinu* seeks to

summarize the overlying intents of the entire service, and reiterates the themes of oneness found in the *Shema*.

Originally a part of the Rosh Hashanah mussaf service, the *Aleinu* was eventually incorporated into the service during Medieval times. According to the Gaonic responsum of Rabbi Hai Ha Gaon, the *Aleinu*, referred to as a declaration of faith was allegedly composed “by Joshua after he led Israel across the Jordan.”⁴³ The first paragraph “Let us now praise the sovereign” or “It is incumbent upon us” recognizes God’s sovereignty and the distinction of Israel among the nations, and the second paragraph, “Therefore” expresses the “optimism” that one day idolatry will be destroyed and that all nations will recognize God as One. Although “God is one already . . . but on a future day all people of the earth, not just the Jews, will recognize God’s unity.” What is and what will be are the same: “God is One.” The only distinction is that we may not yet realize this truth in our present moment. In this regard, the *Aleinu* is messianic, not in terms of the hope that one day everyone will be a Jew but rather that all Jews will know God as One along with all the nations of the earth. *Aleinu* serves as a theological summary of sorts, not quite a prayer in terms of praise or supplication, but an announcement of the essential message of Judaism: God is one and there is no other; one day we will all realize this inevitable truth. Kushner and Pollen beautifully describe this oneness as it dovetails with the *Shema*, ““Ein Od, “literally means, not just “there is none else,” but “there is nothing else.” This dramatically expands the theological assertion: Not only is God the only God, but God is all there is; only God is real; besides God, there is literally “nothing else”; in the Yiddish; alles ist Gott.”⁴⁴

In modern times, the *Aleinu* has been a subject of controversy, given its second verse that “proclaims the greatness of the Creator who has set us apart from the families of the

43. Rabbi Nossom Scherman et al, ed., *The Complete Artscroll Siddur* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993), 158.

44. Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen, “Alenu” in *My People’s Prayer Book Volume 6*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002), 135.

earth, giving us a destiny unique among the nations.” *Mishkan T'filah* has given the Reform movement an alternative first paragraph that omits this line. As Jews have become more integrated into society and intermarried with the nations, asserting our “uniqueness” may alienate members of our families and can be misconstrued as an assertion of Jewish “specialness” over others. Although the *Aleinu* asserts a particularism that could be offensive to people of other faiths, this “uniqueness” could be understood as a celebration of our collective uniqueness, not because others are not also unique, but because we have received the unique gift of Torah. Thus the *Aleinu* describes not a hierarchy of Jews over other peoples, but an affirmation of distinct destinies. The *Aleinu* promises that all peoples will know God as One, a suggestion that in the end of times, distinctions between Jews and the nations will no longer matter.

While in the traditional service one bows during the *Aleinu*, in the Contemplative Service we sit throughout the service. Thus I have applied this “norm” to the *Aleinu* as well. I tried to glean from the *Aleinu* the key summary point: God is one, and one day we will realize this. Like the other chants and meditations in this service, the *Aleinu* seeks to simplify the concepts listed in the siddur and capture the essence of the prayer in order to underscore the meaning. The words of the chant emphasize God’s oneness which will be realized in the future, “on that day” when all will speak God’s name “On that day, we will know your name. And your name will be One, and Your name will be One, and Your name will be One, and Your name is One.” The chant borrows the last verse of the *Aleinu* “On that day, Adonai will be one, and God’s Name will be one.” This chant, like the prayer itself, has a very optimistic tone to it, that one day we will know God’s name and that day, the messianic time, could be today. In the *Aleinu*, all of our prayers arrive full circle. All morning we seek to praise and connect to God in the hope that in the future time, when we all know the Oneness of God, will come in our time--now!

KADDISH

יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא,
 בעלמא די-ברא ברעותה וימליך מלכותה,
 בתייכון וביומיוון, ובחיי דכל בית ישראל,
 בעגלא ובזמן קריב, ואמרו אמן.
 יהא שמה רבא מבורך, לעלם ולעלמי עלמיא.
 יתברך וישתבח, ויתפאר ויתרומם ויתנשא,
 ויתהדר ויתעלה ויתהלל, שמה דקודשא, בריך הוא.
 לעילא מן על [*From Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur substitute*] לעילא ולעילא מקל
 ברבא ושירתא, תשבחתא ונחמא,
 דאמין בעלמא, ואמרו אמן.
 יהא שלמא רבא מן שמיא, וחיים,
 עלינו ועל כל ישראל, ואמרו אמן.
 עשה שלום במרומו,
 הוא יעשה שלום עלינו,
 ועל כל ישראל, ואמרו אמן.

Yit-gadal v'yit-kadash sh'mey raba, b'alma di v'ra hirutey, vyam-lih mal-hutey b'ha-yey-hon
 uv'yomey-hon uv'ha-yey d'hol beyt yisrael ba-agala u-vizman kariv, v'imru amen.

(Congregation and Mourners:)

Y'hey sh'mey raba m'varah l'alam ul'almei alma-ya. (Mourners:)

Yit-barah v'yish-tabah v'yit-pa-ar v'yit-romam v'yit-na-sey v'yit-hadar v'yit-aleh v'yit-halal
 sh'mey d'kud-sha, b'rih hu, leyla* min kol bir-hata v'shi-rata tush-b'hata v'ne-hemata
 da-amiran b'alma, v imru amen.

Y'hey sh'lama raba min sh'ma-ya, v'ha-yim aleynu v'al kol yisrael, vimru amen.

Oseh shalom bim-romav, hu ya-aseh shalom aleynu v'al kol yisrael, v'imru amen.

Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world
which He has created according to His will.

May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days,
and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon;
and say, Amen.

May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity.

Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored,
adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He,
beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that
are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us
and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

He who creates peace in His celestial heights,
may He create peace for us and for all Israel;
and say, Amen.

Explanation

All of our prayers place us in conversation with the Divine. Sometimes prayer serves to praise, sometimes to petition, and sometimes simply to assert God's holiness. The *Mourner's Kaddish* sanctifies God's holy presence. Although this concluding prayer is called "The Mourner's Kaddish," none of its language pertains to the mourner, rather it affirms God's power and sovereignty, and expresses the supplicant's desire for the messianic age. There are many Kaddishes that run throughout the siddur; they serve as dividers. In *Mishkan T'filah* we have included the kaddishes within the service, although in practice we often omit them in order to keep our services brief. Traditionally, the *Kaddish Shalem* (the full *Kaddish*) is recited at the end of every major component of the service. *Kaddish D'Rabbanan* is recited after studying a rabbinic text within the service.

The origin and date of composition of the Kaddishes are unknown but the "lack of any allusion to the destruction of the Temple" suggests that they predate Rabbinic Judaism.⁴⁵

45. Ismar, Elbogen. *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society,

Written primarily in Aramaic, the *Kaddish* can be found in a Palestinian source from *Tractate Soferim* which is thought to have been composed around 600, and comes at the end of the Torah reading.⁴⁶ Later on, when it was used as liturgy, congregational responses (such as *yehei shlimei raba*) were added. The prayer allows us to thank God for the good even when we may be experiencing what we perceive as bad (i.e. death) and also gives “a way of experiencing that which is beyond this world.”⁴⁷ Indeed Anram Gaon said that the seven words of praise: “Lauded, glorified, exalted, raised, honored, uplifted, and praised” represent the seven heavens.⁴⁸ The *Kaddish* was also said to “nullify any negative decrees” against a deceased loved one.⁴⁹

Today in progressive synagogues we often explain the *Mourner's Kaddish* as a way of comforting the mourners, but we can also look at the *Kaddish* as the attempt to ease the journey for the soul of the deceased as it travels back into the heavens. The *Kaddish* is a prayer for the ease of that transition between worlds. We pray for an easy and safe journey and that the soul will find peace in the heavenly bosom of the Divine. Even if we cannot affirm our knowledge of God's existence or fathom with certainty that the soul is part of that eternal nature, we can still allow this prayer to affirm our hope that God exists and that the soul is eternal.

The majority of the prayers in the Contemplative Service shorten the length of the traditional prayers and emphasize their overall meaning. However, I have chosen to include the full *Mourner's Kaddish* because of the superseding need to provide support to the mourner and to ease the journey for the deceased's soul. While many congregants are unfamiliar with the meaning of other liturgy, they know the *Mourner's Kaddish* and appreciate its function as a memorial and often come to the synagogue for the soul reason to

1993), 81.

46. Ibid.

47. Daniel Landes “Concluding Prayers” in *My People's Prayer Book Volume 6*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002), 112.

48. Hammer, 283.

49. Ibid.

recite it in honor of a recent passing or Yartzeit. By sanctifying the divine name and asserting the miracles of God's presence here on earth, the affirmations of the Kaddish elevate us through remembering God's strength and wonders even in the midst of our own pain.

Conclusion

My hope throughout the creation of this thesis and service has been to plant new seeds for prayer in fertile soil. The prayers have been my seeds and the community the soil which has allowed a flourishing of old-time devotion through new interpretation. The very process of its creation has opened me up further to my own relationship to God and shown me that my creativity springs out of my desire to live in and with the Oneness that for me is Hashem. Our tradition holds the rich spirituality that seekers desire and has the ability, with proper guidance, to lead people into the experience of the Divine that they so crave. Prayer can be a journey out of the theory of the mind into a sacred reality of the heart, a respite not only from the grind of the work week but a chance to enter the timelessness so pronounced in the *Shema* and *Aleinu*.

In the lineage of our forbearers this service honors the sacred through simplifying the traditional wisdom into a concise form. In that simplified form, these prayers become more accessible to the less educated Jew and give the leader an opportunity to teach about prayer. Participants have shared with me that they have learned more in this service than ever before both through explanations given and through the quiet spaciousness interspersed throughout the service. The ample pauses between chants emphasize the individual's personal experience over the need to rush through the fixed order assigned by the rabbis. While I work with the service sheet, it is simply a guidepost and I add or take out prayers depending on the flow of the service and the response of the participants. Sometimes I will spontaneously add

a chant if it feels appropriate. At its best it is an organic dialogue between the congregation and me as the service leader. That dialogue requires a flexibility in form and time. Most importantly, the prayer allows for a growing relationship with the Divine. That personal and communal relationship takes priority over the fixed rubric of our ancestors. This effort seeks not to undermine the tradition, but aims to first honor our present needs before placing ourselves within the very deep trenches of the tradition and its many words and references.

By modeling my own intimacy and vulnerability in prayer, I think I have enabled the participants to feel safe enough to open up the desires of their hearts to one another. When this service first began and we first recited the *Ten B'libeinu* together, congregants hesitated to share their own prayers. A year and a half into the service, the spontaneous part of this prayer sometimes persists for several minutes as participants share the prayer of their hearts with each other. To witness this evolution and growth has deeply touched me as a teacher and guide. My students have grown and I am excited for the spiritual journey that they are on and the role this service has been able to play. For many, this service has helped strengthen their spiritual process. Some have learned about creating a relationship with God through personal and traditional prayer where it may not have been accessible beforehand. I am humbled to see the affects of such work and to hear the affirmations from congregants as to what the service has meant for them.

Here is what some of them had to say:

The main thing I like about the Contemplative Service is that the leader is always smiling. Sara's smile opens up, triggers positive emotions for me. That is a great beginning, a good opening to any service, as well as to this service.

What I like about the Contemplative Service is

- 1. getting me in the present moment (where I find God)*
- 2. a service that has the structure of traditional Shabbat morning service.*

3. *free flowing focus of my Jewish spiritual connection, experience and relationship to the Divine Presence*

The service does a wonderful job of raising my awareness to the unseen light of God's presence upon me, upon all participating on Shabbat morning. Sara has a wonderful way of suggesting some ways I can attain some sort of grateful, graceful emotional connection with our God on the day meant especially to do this. I feel so much more energized after the hour has gone by. I also feel that one of the main reasons for the command of Shabbat is better fulfilled through the Contemplative Service.

I have been attending the Contemplative Service for the last ten months and it has been a deeply moving experience. Sara's highest goal for each one of us is that we experience - even if for only for a moment - the Divine presence within ourselves.

Through chant and meditation, she creates a safe and loving space where we can begin to open our hearts. Even within those safe walls, she challenges us to go a little deeper each time by speaking out our longings for God. The hardest moment comes when we are encouraged to look each person in the eye as we sing a song of praise and devotion. Sara's love for us is a blessing and a guide to accepting God's love

The Contemplative Service takes on a different character each Shabbat. The service follows the order and the rhythm of the siddur, but focuses on key elements, those connected with heart and soul. The combination of liturgy, meditation and niggun, working within an atmosphere of love and an intention for spiritual growth, carries a unique power. Yet the context of community and tradition provides what Sara might call a "container", a place of safety and tranquility. At its best, I think this is prayer the way it was intended to be, where the search within and quest without become one and the same thing. I'm never the same person leaving the worship as I was coming in.

Spend a few minutes inside the Brick Roundhouse on Clark Drive & here's what U get: celestial references, assorted short prayers, strategic silences - all of it briskly moved along by the cheerful running commentary of Sara Abrams, Rabbi-in-Training and topped out by the put-your-hands-together "On That Day We Will Know Your Name" (shades of Creedence Clearwater Revival) and you know you're ready for the week to come

For both my husband and I the experience of the Contemplative Service has been a journey of discovery and joy. We have both benefited from the chance to explore prayer both communally and then individually in the times of silence. The guided meditations have helped direct and focus our thoughts and energies and chanting the nigguns has been a positive part of the total worship experience. My husband, , having no previous experience with spirituality or meditation, was skeptical at first as to how he would relate and find the experience. It has opened his heart and mind in so many ways and he looks forward to each service. I have found that it has deepened my meditations and led me on some occasions to a deep spiritual connection with something far greater than my understanding. We were both pleased to have this service as part of the High Holy days worship and have it expand to twice a month.

The Contemplative Service is a joyous experience for all who are blessed to share in it. The teachings inspire us, and beautifully composed chants from Torah texts uplift us, and the guided meditations help us pray. The service as a whole is a wonder, opening a space to allow the light of the Divine to enter.

The service has transformed my own prayer practice as well as allowed for the spiritual growth and experience of others. I now feel that it is my obligation to make these prayers my own, to interpret them and find the ways that they move my own heart. I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to create a safe environment for others to open their hearts and open up to God. As a society we have moved so far away from placing God at the center of our lives and from believing that God does really pervade all—even us. The prophet Ezekiel wrote, “And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove from you a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh”(Ezekiel 36:26), I believe that within every person lies the desire to know his own soul. In finding it, we uncover that new spirit and soften our hearts to become hearts of flesh. In prayer we can learn to become truly alive, and experience what it is to place God’s oneness at the center of our lives.

Bibliography

- Bokser, Ben Zion. *The Jewish Mystical Tradition*. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981.
- Brofsky, David. *Hilchot Tefillah: A Comprehensive Guide to the Laws of Daily Prayer*. New York: Oupress, 2010.
- Elbogen, Ismar. *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993.
- Hammer, Reuven. *Entering Jewish Prayer*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: The Noon Day Press, 1998, 28.
- Hoffman, Larry Ed. *My People's Prayer Book. Volume 1-6*. Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights Publishing. 1997.
- Kaplan, Aryeh. *Jewish Meditation*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.
- Kaplan, Aryeh. *Inner Space*. Jerusalem: Monzaim Publishing Company, 1991.
- Munk, Elie. *The World of Prayer*. New York: P. Feldheim, 1954.
- Nosom, Reb. *LikuteyTefilot Reb Noson's Prayers Volume I*. Translated by Avraham Greenbaum. Jersualem: Breslov Research Institute, 1992.
- Trachtenberg, Joshua. *Jewish Magic and Superstition*. New York, Atheneum, 1970.
- Scherman, Nossom et al, ed. *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*. New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993.