



Hilkhot Tefilah
Laws of Prayer

Chapter 1:1-6

1 To pray daily is an affirmative duty, as it is said, “And you shall serve the Lord you God” (Ex. 23:25). The service here referred to, according to the teaching of tradition, is prayer, as it is said, “And to serve Him with all your heart” (Deut. 11:13), on which the sages commented, “What may be described as service of the heart? Prayer.” The number of prayers is not prescribed in the Torah. No form of prayer is prescribed in the Torah. Nor does the Torah prescribe a fixed time for prayer. Hence, women and slaves are under an obligation to pray, this being a duty, the fulfillment of which is independent of set periods.

2 The obligation in this precept is that every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer; first uttering praises of God, then with humble supplication and petition asking for all that he needs, and finally offering praise and thanksgiving to the Eternal for the benefits already bestowed upon him in rich measure.

3 One who was fluent would offer up many prayers and supplications. If one was slow of speech, he would pray as he could and whenever he pleased. Thus also, the number of separate services depended on an individual’s ability. One would pray once daily; others, several times in the day. All, however, turned during the prayer to the Sanctuary, in whichever direction that might be. This was the uniform practice from the times of Moses to those of Ezra.

4 When the people of Israel went into exile in the days of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, they mingled with Persians Greeks, and other nations. In those foreign countries, children were born to them, whose language was confused. Everyone’s speech was a mixture of many tongues. No one was able, when he spoke, to express his thoughts adequately in any one language, otherwise than incoherently, as it is said, “And their children spoke half in the speech of Ashdod and they could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people” (Neh. 13:24).

5 Consequently, when anyone of them prayed in Hebrew, he was unable adequately to express his needs or recount the praises of God, without mixing Hebrew with other languages. When Ezra and his council realized this condition, they ordained the Eighteen Benedictions in their present order.

6 The first three blessings consist of praises of God and the last three of thanksgiving to Him. The intermediate benedictions are petitions for the things which may stand as prototypes of all the desires of the individual and the needs of the community. The object aimed at was that these prayers should be in an orderly form in everyone’s mouth, that all

should learn them, and thus the prayer of those who were not expert in speech would be as perfect as that of those who had command of a chaste style. For the same reason, they arranged (in a fixed form) all the blessings and prayers for all Jews so that the substance of every blessing should be familiar and current in the mouth of one who is not expert in speech.

Chapter 2:1-3

1 In Rabban Gamliel's days, the number of heretics in Israel increased. They were wont to vex the Israelites and induce them to turn away from God. When Rabban Gamliel realized that the most urgent need was to remove this evil, he composed a benediction which contain a petition to God to destroy the heretics, and incorporated it in the Eighteen Blessings so that it should be in a fixed form for all. Hence the total number of blessings in the daily service is nineteen.

2 In each of the three daily services, a person recites these nineteen blessings in their appointed order—but only if he finds that his mind is in a fit state for prayer and he is fluent in speech. But if one is distracted and harassed, or is not fluent in speech, he should recite the first three blessings, a blessing embodying the gist of all the intermediate blessings, and the last three blessings, and then he has fulfilled his duty.

3 The blessing that they ordained as a summary of the intermediate blessings is as follows: Give us understanding, O Lord, our God, to know Your ways, and circumcise our hearts to fear You. Be forgiving of us, so that we may be redeemed. Keep us far from sorrow. Make us prosperous. Cause us to dwell in the pastures of Your land. Gather the scattered from the four [corners of the earth]. Let them that go astray in the knowledge of You be judged; and over the wicked wave Your hand. Let the righteous rejoice in the rebuilding of Your city and in the re-establishment of Your temple, and in the flourishing of the horn of David, Your servant, and in the rekindling of the light of Jesse's son, Your anointed. Before we call, do You answer; before we speak, do You hearken; as it is said, "And it shall come to pass, before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear" (Is. 65:24); for You are He who answers in all times of trouble, who delivers and rescues from all distress, Blessed are You, O Lord, who hearkens to prayer.

Chapter 4:1; 15-19

1 There are five requisites, the absence of which hinder the (proper) recital of a service, even when its due time has arrived: cleansing the hands, covering the body, assurance as to the cleanliness of the place where the prayers are recited, removal of distractions, and concentration of the mind.

15 Concentration of the mind—how is this condition (to be fulfilled)? Any prayer uttered without mental concentration is not prayer. If a service has been recited without such concentration, it must be recited again devoutly. A person finds that his thoughts are confused and his mind is distracted, he may not pray till he has recovered his mental composure. Hence, on returning from a journey or if one is weary or distressed, it is forbidden to pray till his mind is composed. The sages said that he should wait three days till he is rested and his mind is calm, and then he recites the prayers.

16 What is to be understood by concentration of the mind? The mind should be freed from all extraneous thoughts and the one who prays should realize that he is standing before the Divine Presence. He should therefore sit awhile before beginning his prayers, so as to concentrate his mind, and then pray in gentle tones, beseechingly, and not regard the service as a burden which he is carrying and which he will cast off before proceeding on his way. He should, accordingly, sit awhile, after concluding the prayers, and then leave. The ancient saints were wont to pause and meditate one hour before the service, one hour after the service, and take one hour in its recital.*

17 An intoxicated person must not pray because he cannot concentrate. If he prays, his prayer is an abomination. He must therefore recite the prayers again after he has recovered from his intoxication. A person under the influence of drink should not pray while in that condition. But if he has recited the service, it is regarded as prayer. A drunkard is one who is unable to speak in the royal presence. A person under the influence of drink is one who can speak in the presence of a king without committing error. Yet having drunk, if only a quarter of a *log* of wine, + one is not to pray till he is rid of the effect of the wine he has taken.

18 So too, persons should not stand up to pray after indulging in jest, laughter, frivolity, idle talk, quarreling, or outbursts of anger, but only after the study of Torah, not however of legal discussions by which the mind is distracted, but only after the study of such themes as require no profound reflection, as for instance established rules.

19 Prayers which are read only at periodic intervals, such as the additional service for the beginning of the month and the services for the festivals, should be first rehearsed before one stands up to recite them so that he shall not break down during their recital.

Chapter 9:7

7 Whoever says in his supplications, “He that dealt mercifully with a nest of birds, forbidding the taking of the mother-bird together with the nestlings (Deut. 22:6-7) and the slaughtering of a beast and its young in one day (Lev. 22:28)—may He have mercy upon us,” or offers petitions of a similar character, is silenced; for these precepts are divine decrees set forth in Scripture and have not been ordained in a spirit of compassion.* Were this the motive, the slaughtering of all animals would have been prohibited. It is also forbidden to multiply epithets and say: “O God, great, mighty, awe-inspiring, powerful, puissant,” since it is beyond human power to exhaust the praises of God. One should therefore limit himself to the attributes used by Moses our Teacher, peace be upon him.+

Chapter 11:1 & 4

1 Wherever there are ten Israelites resident, an edifice must be fitted up, where they can assemble for worship at each period of prayer. Such a building is termed a synagogue. The residents exercise compulsory powers on each other for the purpose of erecting a synagogue and purchasing a scroll of the Law (Pentateuch), the prophetic books, and the Hagiography.

4 Synagogues and houses of study must be treated with respect. They are swept and sprinkled to lay the dust. In Spain and the West (Morocco), in Babylon and in the Holy Land, it is customary to kindle lamps in the synagogues and to spread mats on the floor on which the worshipers sit. In the lands of Edom (Christian countries) they sit in synagogues on chairs (or benches).

Chapter 12

1 Moses our Teacher established the rule for Israel that they should read the Law publicly on Sabbaths and also on the second and fifth days of the week, during the morning service, so that three days shall not elapse without hearing the Law. Ezra established the rule that the Torah should be read at the afternoon service every Sabbath, for the benefit of those who would otherwise spend the day vacuously. He also ordained that on the second and fifth days of the week, three persons should be called to the reading of the Torah and that they should read not fewer than three verses each.

Chapter 13:1 & 11

1 The custom prevailing through Israel is (that the reading of the Pentateuch is completed in one year). It is begun on the Sabbath after the Feast of Tabernacles, when the portion commencing *Bereshit*, “In the beginning” (Gen. 1:1), is read. On the second Sabbath, that beginning, “These are the generations of Noah” (Gen. 6:9), is read; on the third, that beginning, “And the Lord said to Abraham” (*ibid.* 12:1), and so on in regular order till the last portion is read on the Feast of Tabernacles. Some complete the reading of the Pentateuch in three years, but this is not a prevalent custom.

11 On the Day of Atonement, in the morning service, the section read is that beginning, “After the death of the two sons of Aaron” (Lev. 16:1—34); and the lesson from the Prophets is that beginning, “For thus says the High and Lofty One” (Is. 57:15-58:14). In the afternoon service, the section read is that concerning incest, in the portion beginning, “After the death of the two sons of Aaron” (Lev. 18). The purpose aimed at is that anyone who has been guilty of any of these offenses should remember and be abashed. The third person called up reads in the Torah and recites, as the lesson from the Prophets, the Book of Jonah.