

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE PRAYER LIFE OF THE OBSERVANT JEW *

*** Again we must caution the reader that the historic — the traditional — type of Judaism (including prayer life) is rapidly vanishing. However, we think that every Christian should be acquainted with it as the background of contemporary Jewry.**

The whole life of the observant Jew is wrapped in prayer. He awakes in the morning and goes to sleep at night with a prayer on his lips. During the day he goes to the synagogue for three long prayers (in the morning, afternoon and evening). Besides the three services at the synagogue there are the prayers which are recited at home. A good Jew has to recite at least one hundred benedictions during the day. He must not eat or drink anything without certain specified blessings before and after it, and there are special benedictions for each kind of food; and not only for food, but for each time he experiences an extraordinary sight, sound or smell. In Yiddish the prescribed recitation of the three prayers is called “davnen.”

His conversation, too, is interspersed frequently with some pious words as, “Praise be to God,” “Thank God,” “If God wills,” “With the help of God,” “May God avert it” (some evil), “May God protect us,” etc. As in conversation, so also in correspondence; the Jew is ever mindful of God, so every letter begins with: “Blessed be God” or “With the help of God,” etc.

Even when some misfortune befalls him, he is to praise God. Upon hearing of the death of someone dear to him, he is to say, “Blessed be the truthful judge.” There is the pious adage, “Whatever the All Compassionate does, He does it for the best.” *

*** The Jew is careful not to take the name of God in vain, so that when not in prescribed and fixed prayer, he generally uses instead, the word haShem — “the name” — thus Baruch haShem translated is “blessed be the name.”**

And there is the “Thillim” — the Psalms — a steady companion of the pious Jew. Not only are Psalms to be recited on various occasions, in times of trouble, anxiety, etc., but he likes to fill in every idle moment at home, at the synagogue, at his work, on his travels — with Psalms either by reading or from memory. Some Jews know all 150 Psalms by heart, although with many Jews it is more “prayer reciting” than actually praying.

HISTORY OF PRAYER

Let us take a glance at the history of the Jewish prayer. The word “Tefillah,” the Hebrew word for “prayer,” is derived from the root “palal” which means “to think,” “to hope,” “to judge” and also “to fall down,” “to bow.” It is “to fall” that probably served as root for prayer since prayer was originally generally performed by prostration or bowing down before God. *

*** The various meanings of Pallal have led to the (mis)translation into English of I Samuel 2:25, “If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him; but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them.” While the Hebrew words for “judge” and “intreat” (other versions have different translations) are about the same, both might better be translated by “intercede” or “mediate.”**

With the Jews, prayer is as old as the beginning of their race. Indeed, according to Jewish tradition and legend, the three daily prayers were first instituted by the three patriarchs. Moses prayed, so did Joshua and the other prophets and men of God. King David is better known as the author of the Psalms, as the “sweet singer of Israel,” than for his epoch-making deeds (mostly by his wars). His Psalms are, and will ever be, the best prayer book in the world. We find Solomon in prayer at the dedication of the Temple which he dedicated as a “**House of Prayer**” for all peoples. (See I Kings 8). Isaiah 56:7 also refers to this Sanctuary as the “**House of prayer**” to all the nations:

“Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.”

Prayer during the First Temple was more of a personal nature, where each worshiper expressed voluntarily and spontaneously his feelings and devotion to God, petitioning Him for help or thanking Him for help He had already rendered him. But it seems that there was also some kind of communal prayer, besides the daily sacrificial rites, which were (especially during the Second Temple) accompanied by orchestras of various musical instruments.

The necessity for communal prayer probably began to be felt after the reforms were instituted by King Josiah when sacrificial rites were limited only to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews who lived far away from Jerusalem felt that they ought to have a “House of Prayer” in their vicinity (“a lesser Temple”), where they could study the Torah and pray.

After the destruction of the First Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial rites, the Jews felt all the more the need for prayer to replace the sacrifices, as Hosea preached (14:2) “— **so will we render the calves of our lips.**”

Thus arose that typically Jewish institution (nothing like it in all the world) which we call “synagogue” or in Hebrew “*Beth — Knesseth*,” a house of Congregation, for prayer and for study and often also for various meetings of communal importance. (See chapter on The Jewish Community — the Synagogue).

During the Second Temple, although the daily sacrifices were reinstated, prayer both private and communal continued not only in the synagogue of the Dispersion but also in Judea and even in Jerusalem and in the Temple. Communal prayer in the synagogue has come to be considered not only as a supplement of the sacrifices of the Temple but as a divine service in itself.

Jesus, who Himself often prayed to the Father and urged His followers to pray, preferred secret prayer to that which was practiced ceremoniously and ostentatiously in the synagogue. Yet His objections were only against public prayers as practiced by hypocrites and by the heathen (See Matthew 6).

After the destruction of the Second Temple, prayer at the synagogue had replaced the Temple worship entirely. Thus, wherever there arose a Jewish settlement, however small, they built themselves a synagogue. From the New Testament we learn that wherever Paul went in his journeyings, he nearly always found a synagogue where he could start his preaching of the Gospel. **“For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day”** (Acts 15:21, See chapter on The Jewish Community — the Synagogue).

It is difficult to state at what point public communal prayer became obligatory; nor do we know exactly of what those common prayers consisted. They were no doubt a slow development which included some of the Psalms and other portions of the Bible and later also of the Talmud as well as Jewish poetry. Some early rabbis were against fixed prayers at fixed times. Even after the Second Temple when the daily prayers were fixed and obligatory, some rabbis taught that God would better be served by the study of His Law, rather than by prayer. Some of the ancient rabbis prayed but seldom.

By the time of Jesus there were already certain prescribed prayers to be recited daily. There was the prayer known by the term *“Sh’mone Esrei”* — “Eighteen” — because it was composed of eighteen benedictions. There was also the *“Sh’ma”* * and probably some others (which some congregation or individual chose to include, especially certain Psalms).

*** The “Shema” is the most solemn “prayer” (recited three times daily) and consists of the verses of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. It is particularly, the first part of it, a profession of faith in and dedication to God (the One and only God) — the quintessence of Judaism.**

After the Second Temple, when prayer was the only kind of worship that could substitute the sacrifices, there were many additions not only in petition and supplication, mainly for the common welfare, especially for the restoration of the Temple, but also of adoration, thanksgiving and confession, and even of instruction; thus were the laws concerning the sacrifices daily recited, with the hope and prayer that God would soon reinstate them.

“Prayer” was recited from memory for many years. It was not until 875 A.D. that the “Gaon” Amram undertook the task of definitely prescribing the ritual for the various services.

But even after his time, there were many additions of liturgic poems to be recited on certain holy days. However, these additions were not obligatory.

This compilation of prayers — “Siddur” — was generally accepted as the authorized prayer book. A radical change in liturgy was later instituted by the Reformists. They dropped many of the age-old hallowed prayers, in particular all those which have to do with the return of Zion and the ancient sacrificial rites. They introduced the sermon as a fixed factor of the service while previously it had been used only occasionally.

They also began to use the language of their country for the prayers instead of Hebrew which had been used for prayer all through the ages with few exceptions (Some prayers are in Aramaic).

THE THREE DAILY PRAYERS

The custom of praying three times a day has its roots in antiquity. Psalm 55:17 tells of praying evening, morning and noon. Daniel (6:10, 11) also prayed three times a day. The morning prayer (shacharith) lasts about an hour. The afternoon (mincha) and evening (ma’ariv) services are usually one following the other and together they, too, last about one hour.

Besides the three daily prayers at the synagogue, there is also some reading, during the service, in the sacred scroll of the Pentateuch, on Mondays and Thursdays. During the Sabbath service a whole “sidra” (see vocabulary) is read from the Pentateuch, to which was added a portion from the “Prophets.” There are also additions to the usual daily prayers — on the Sabbath and holy days. (The Rosh Hashonah service lasts several hours, while that of Yom Kippur lasts a whole day and a great part of the preceding night).

The additions to the morning service on holy days are mostly “piutim,” poetical compositions, incorporated during the Middle Ages, some of which are devotional, some doctrinal or dealing with Law, or even allusions to some historical event.

We cannot within the limited space of this book enlarge upon the various “prayers” or rather parts of these prayers, and we would therefore advise the student to procure a Jewish prayer book in English translation and study it. It would be well worthwhile.

PREPARATION AND POSTURE

Prayer requires preparation. It needs dedication and purification of mind and body. The worshiper must exclude all worldly and selfish thoughts while in communication with the Creator. Also his body must be clean. No one may pray or utter the name of God without previously washing his hands. Pious Jews used to wash the whole body by immersion in a ritual basin (Mikveh) before the morning prayer. The lower part of the body was considered as not clean enough for prayer, so a special belt is worn during prayer to separate it from the upper part which does the actual performance of the ritual.

The morning prayer (scharith) is to be recited in a “tallith” (a praying-shawl), and “tefillin” (phylacteries). These are not used on Sabbath or on Holy Days.

The solemn prayers are recited in standing posture, facing the East — in the direction of Jerusalem, according to I Kings 8:38; II Chronicles 6:39. So we find Daniel (6:10, 11) praying three times daily with his face turned toward Jerusalem.

At home a picture called “Mizrach” (east) hung on the wall facing the East as a reminder of the location of Jerusalem. In the synagogue, the “east wall” has special importance: there stands the ark containing the Torah and there are the seats of the rabbi and the other dignitaries of the community.

While the prayers may be recited alone at home, the recitation is better and more efficacious when done in a congregation *because the “Shekinah” is present when ten or more Jews are united in prayer*. This quorum of ten (minyan) must be adult males over thirteen years of age. When a Jewish boy reaches the age of thirteen he becomes “Bar-Mitzvah” (a son of the Law) — responsible to Law, and a full-fledged member of the Jewish community with all religious duties and privileges that this entails.

When the service is performed in “congregation,” one of the congregants (if over thirteen years old) serves as leader called “Chazan” (see vocabulary) cantor, or “Baal Tefillah” (“man of prayer”).

While any one of the congregation may perform all the rites in the service, larger congregations have special functionaries for leading in prayer, reading in the Scrolls, blowing of the Shofar, etc. Only the Priestly benediction may not be performed by a layman. It must be done by descendants of Aaron, the first priest.

The Benediction that follows the larger meals is quite elaborate and is also better performed by a quorum of three, at least, of whom one is the leader. In the singing of “Zemiroth” which accompanies the meals on Sabbath and holy days, all the male household participate.

As already mentioned all prayers, with little exception, are recited in Hebrew, although not many of those who recite the prayers understand them.

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