

Prayer

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

For Jews worship is a divinely prescribed obligation. In ancient times, sacrifice to God was of central importance. Three types of sacrifice were offered in the Temple: animal sacrifice, burnt offerings for sin, and meal offerings and libations. The rituals and practices connected with these acts are listed in the Books of Leviticus and Numbers. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, sacrifice was replaced by prayer. This new ritual was referred to as ‘service of the heart’. The central elements of the synagogue liturgy consisted of the *Shema* and *Amidah*. During the worship service sections of the Torah and the Prophets were recited. By the end of the Talmudic period, the prayer service was supplemented by liturgical hymns. For Jewish mystics, cleaving to God (*devekut*) is the primary goal of prayer. It was the aim of the mystic to conjoin God in his letters and to link the ten *sefirot* (divine emanations) to him. As the thirteenth-century kabbalist Nahmanides explained, *devekut* is a state of mind in which one is constantly aware of God. In ascending the higher worlds, the path of prayer paralleled the observance of the *mitzvot*. Mystical prayer, accompanied by meditation, was a feature of various kabbalistic systems. For the kabbalist, prayer constitutes a means by which the soul can ascend into the higher realm and thereby integrate with the higher spheres.

In the eighteenth century *Hasidim* incorporated kabbalistic ideas into their understanding of prayer. In their view, the kabbalistic type of *kavvanot* (intention) can bring about an involvement and attachment to God. Prayer is in this way understood as a mystical encounter between the human and the Divine in which the heart is elevated toward its source. Following the Enlightenment in the next century, major reforms were made within non-Orthodox circles to

the Jewish liturgy. Under the influence of Israel Jacobson, reformers created a new place of worship, the Temple, in which singing, hymns and addresses were in the vernacular. The aim of such reforms was to adapt Jewish worship to modern aesthetic standards. No surprisingly, such changes were viewed by the Orthodox as heretical acts. In surveying such alterations to the liturgy, you should ask yourself whether Jewish worship services required the modernization carried out by Reform Judaism. Were these reformers right to initiate such changes? Similarly, you should assess the adaptations made by other non-Orthodox branches of Judaism. Have Conservative, Reconstructionist and Humanistic Jews strengthened the tradition, or weakened it? Is liturgical change necessary? Or, is it better to retain the ancient pattern of worship?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google.com. Search for websites dealing with Jewish prayer, such as <www.aish.com>.
- Stay in Google. Click on images. Type in ‘Temple’, ‘synagogue’, ‘Jewish worship’, etc. for illustrations of Jewish worship.
- Go to Amazon.com. Search for books dealing with Jewish prayer.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- If possible, take your students to an Orthodox as well as a Reform or Conservative synagogue service. Tell them to make a list of the differences in practice.
- Go to Google. Click on images. Make a power-point presentation of various aspects of the Temple and synagogue worship service.
- Record the synagogue liturgy. Play it to your class, explaining the various elements of the service.