

# Prayer and Kavanah (Part 1)

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Ohev Yisrael is on a path to becoming a congregation of learners. We have a fine children's Shabbat School, a new adult education program on Shabbat afternoons, and private teaching being provided to those who have requested it. I am meeting with several of you already, and I want to extend myself to any others of you who would like to schedule private tutelage in a similar manner.

We are also becoming a congregation of *Torah* studiers and readers of Scripture. Although the Scriptures we read during our *Torah* Service are relatively few, our *Torah* Study group (open to all) that meets after the *oneg* pours over the weekly *parashah* more completely and more in depth. And this *Shabbat* we are moving even one step further in becoming a congregation of studiers by including in the bulletin, not only the *parashah* for the week to come, but a breakdown into daily readings so that we can all read and be familiar with the entire *parashah* by the following *Shabbat*. This week's bulletin only contains daily *Torah* readings, but starting next week we will add daily readings drawn from the entire Bible, so that over a one to three year period, every chapter and verse of the Bible will have been read.

Ohev is moving in outreach as well. Our upcoming *Chanukah* celebration is only one step in this, and it will be a success if we all think of whom we can invite that needs to know the Lord, or needs a congregational home; in addition to our personal invitations, flyers for this event are being hand-delivered to all the neighboring businesses within this industrial complex. And other areas of outreach are currently being contemplated as well, including one of our *chavurot* periodically visiting a local nursing home; if any of you have other outreach ideas, please bring them to Elder Bruce's attention.

Now these remarks summarizing a few of our ministries were merely leading up to what I want to talk to you about today, which is that Ohev is also progressing toward becoming a congregation of pray-ers and worshipers of God. We have a good start already through our intercessory prayer team led by Sherry Levy, and through the ministry of our praise and worship led by Bruce on Saturday, and Scott on Friday night. But there is more that we can do on both a personal and a congregational level, so let's turn to Scripture for inspiration and some direction. When we are looking for instruction about prayer, it is always good to read about David. In Psalm 55:17, David reveals something of his intense prayer life when he tells us:

*"Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice."*

And the apostle Paul encourages us to pray by instructing us in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18:

*"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Messiah Yeshua for you."*

There are different kinds of prayers. For example, there are prayers of petition – prayers where we ask God for something. In Mark 11:24 we read:

*"Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.*

There are also prayers where we do not ask God for anything, but rather thank Him for what he has done, praise Him for who He is, and even sing – yes, sing to Him:

Psalm 92:1-2: *"It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; to declare Your lovingkindness in the morning, And Your faithfulness every night,..."*

Psalm 105:1-5: *"Oh, give thanks to the LORD! Call upon His name; Make known His deeds among the peoples! Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works! Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD! Seek the LORD and His strength; Seek His face evermore! Remember His marvelous works which He has done, His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth,..."*

Then there are prayers where we meditate upon and confess His Word:

Joshua 1:8: *"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it."*

Psalm 119:97: *"Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day."*

Psalm 119:148: *"My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word."*

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Prayer is not only talking to God, but also listening to Him and sometimes just being silent:

Proverbs 8:32-34: *"Now therefore, listen to me, my children, For blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, And do not disdain it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, Watching daily at my gates, Waiting at the posts of my doors.*

Psalm 46:10: *"Be still, and know that I am God;..."*

Prayer is not only expressed in languages that we understand, but sometimes in languages that only our spirit understands, as Paul explained to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 14:14-15: *"For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding."*

And in verse 18 Paul says:

*“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;”*

Scripture teaches that there are many postures in which we may pray; we can bow our heads as Moses did:

Exodus 34:8: *“So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped.”*

We can pray standing as Yeshua taught:

Mark 11:25: *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”*

We can bow down our entire body or kneel as Psalm 95:6 teaches:

*“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.”*

Or we can pray on our face as Yeshua did:

Matthew 26:39: *“He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.’”*

Now let’s review what we have learned so far about prayer:

1. We are given David’s example of praying and crying aloud three times a day.
2. We are encouraged to pray without ceasing.
3. In everything, we are to give thanks.
4. We are to have faith for anything we ask in prayer.
5. We are to praise God, call upon His Name, and sing to Him.
6. We are to be still and know Him.
7. We are to meditate on His Word.
8. We are to pray both in the Spirit and with understanding.
9. And finally, there are many postures in which we can pray – standing, bowing, kneeling, or on our face.

There are many other Scriptures that relate to prayer, but I would like to focus on what are perhaps the most important truths about prayer as they are revealed in the second sentence of James 5:16:

*“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”*

For prayer to be most effective, it should be prayed by a righteous man or woman, and it should be fervent. Let’s start with the righteousness of the pray-er and look to Proverbs 15:29 to see why it matters:

*“The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.”*

It is just a spiritual truth that as we sin we harden our hearts and distance ourselves from God, so that our prayers become dimmer and dimmer until, in the extreme, a believer can even reach a place from which he or she can no longer be renewed to repentance (Hebrews 6:4-6). The lesson learned here is that the first step in prayer is self-examination and repentance – making things right with God regarding any sins we are aware that we have committed.

The second requirement in James 5:16 for our prayer to be effective, is that it must be fervent. In other words, our approach to God should be focused, purposeful, and express earnest if not urgent desire that mirrors the will of God. There is no formula for this. The words of that we pray are not what impresses God; it is our prayerful heart that counts.

*“Kavanah”* is a Jewish concept that speaks to this. *“Kavanah”* literally means “concentration or intent,” but it is generally used to mean one’s awareness of speaking to God. One might well ask how a person can speak to God and not be aware of it. Unfortunately it is all too easy, and most of us have fallen into it by singing or reciting words automatically without thinking about what we are saying.

Let’s take, for example, any one of today’s praise and worship songs; for simplicity, let’s pick one that has English lyrics like “How Great Is Our God.” A person who sings that and at the same time imagines and feels the greatness of God is exhibiting *kavanah*, while another person who joins in the singing but whose mind is a thousand miles away is neither praising nor praying because he or she is not exhibiting *kavanah*.

The principle is the same when we say “Amen” to a prayer of intercession uttered by a brother. The exercise of *kavanah* requires that we listen carefully to the brother’s prayer, understand it, decide that we want to support it by praying it ourselves, think of God as being to whom we want the prayer directed, and then say “Amen” with absolute intention.

Our proper use of Jewish liturgical prayer is exactly the same, but adds the additional complexity of being bilingual. Except for that though, it is no different than any other song or prayer that someone other than our self composes and that we want to adopt as our own. We have to go through the same process of comprehension, analysis, decision, focus on God, and then uttering the words or agreeing with someone else’s utterance by proclaiming “Amen!” Without every one of those steps there is no *kavanah* and therefore no prayer.

While we are on the subject, let me give you several reasons why I think traditional Jewish prayer is sufficiently important for us, that those of us who are limited by speaking English only should put in the extra effort of dealing with the Hebrew:

1. Hebrew is the language in which the Mosaic Covenant was given, and is the language in which the largest part of the Holy Scriptures is written.
2. Hebrew provides a link to Jews all over the world and particularly to the Jews of Israel.

3. Hebrew is the language of Jewish thought. Languages are unique to the extent that certain nuances of biblical meaning cannot be easily conveyed except in Hebrew.
4. Traditional Jewish prayers and their order of use are known the world over, enabling Jews and Gentiles from distant parts of the world to pray together in a united Jewish way.
5. Traditional Jewish prayers link the generations. The same prayers that are prayed today are the ones that our parents and their parents prayed.
6. Finally, knowing Jewish prayers and the order in which they are prayed, enables any member of a Jewish congregation to conduct a prayer service; this diminishes reliance on a trained clergy, and increases the leadership responsibility and equality of the individual congregational members.

Because traditional Jewish prayers are pre-composed and not generated anew each time they are prayed, being steadfast to pray them with *kavanah* is essential. Just as we must do when we are invited to follow along in singing a contemporary song to God, we must internally process each thought within each traditional prayer so that, by the time we allow ourselves to utter it, we do so with understanding and conviction. Although each of the prayers is centuries old and we pray them at each service, when we do pray them we must keep our focus on God and pray them with intent as though it is for the very first time. That is the true meaning of Psalm 98:1:

*“Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!”*

Also, for those of us who are not fluent in Hebrew, we must allow the Hebrew sounds of others to be in the background while we pull our attention away to pray in English using translations that we carry with us or that are provided. It is only by doing this will we be certain that we are praying the prayers and not merely reading them, and eventually, if we keep it up, we will catch on to the Hebrew.

So let us progress toward Ohev becoming a congregation of pray-ers who sing to God, praise Him, worship Him, petition Him, listen to Him in silence, stand, bow, kneel, fall on our face before Him, pray with originality, pray with Jewish liturgy. Pray in Hebrew, pray in English, pray in Spanish, but most important, let us pray with *kavanah* so that our prayers will always be a new song flowing directly from our heart to our father in heaven.

Here is a prayer that Yeshua composed. Let’s practice *kavanah* by praying these words together now, and although we are thoroughly familiar with them, let us pray them as though they were a new song!

Matthew 6:9-13: *“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”*