

# Liturgy in the Jewish Service

by Michael Rudolph

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The experience of returning to my childhood belief in God and in coming to believe in Yeshua was one of great exhilaration because I was propelled from having no personal relationship with God at all, to experiencing one of great intimacy. Ahh, I thought! So this is what it is like to be a Christian! No artificial barriers between me and God! Not like my memory of the dead liturgy in the synagogue where I received *Bar Mitzvah*. And I'm out there in the world with other Christians who have discovered the same intimacy – just God and us!

My first congregational experience after becoming a believer was in a church that considered itself “Full Gospel.” What it meant by that was that it believed in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, and preached relationship with God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Well that is what I was doing even before I knew there was a Holy Spirit, so the way the church conducted its services (with minimum form and maximum emotion) suited me just fine. It was enjoyable and it was uplifting.

I told you before of how, at my pastor's recommendation, I visited Beth Messiah Congregation and how, at first, I didn't like the experience. I was initially turned off by its “Jewishness” and especially by its Jewish liturgy (as little as there was in those days) because I had come to believe that liturgy stood between me and God. I had discovered a new and exciting way of relating to God through structure-less prayer, and did not want to go back to (or even be reminded of) the dryness of the synagogue of my youth.

Well, thanks to the Holy Spirit I did eventually transition from Christianity to Messianic Judaism, but I retained a “love-hate” relationship with Jewish liturgy for many years. This was largely because I found it difficult to reconcile my newly-found Spirit-centered life with praying the same prayers repeatedly, and especially praying with words that were composed by others and who were not even believers in Yeshua.

Well, many years later, here I am leading a service that is highly liturgical. I am sure you have noticed that, from week to week, there is much repetition in the prayers and worship that comprise Ohev Yisrael's Shabbat service. We begin with *Ma Tovu*, which reminds us of God's protection of Israel. Next we sing *V'shamru*, which reminds us that God created the world in 6 days and rested on the seventh. After several danceable praise songs that are selected in advance, we stand for the *Bar'chu* which is a prayer of blessing to God. Following that, we chant the *Sh'ma* and the *V'ahavta* to remind us of God's unity and of the commandment to love Him and to teach His *Torah* to our children; and we recite “The Messiah Yeshua” that acknowledges Yeshua's Lordship and work among us.

Then come several more songs (again selected in advance) and finally there is an intermission in the liturgy when Ohev members can come forward and share Words they believe God has given them.

Following that we pray the *Amidah* – the first two benedictions, followed by a song or two, followed by unstructured or silent prayer, and concluding with Sim Shalom.

Now we're finished with the liturgy – right? Not right! We have a *Torah Service* that is entirely liturgical, the *Shulchan Adonai* that is partly liturgical, and, of course, the *Kaddish*. Now what is really strange given my history and background that I related to you, is that I have grown completely comfortable with this style of Jewish service and, each week, when I evaluate the service, I find myself satisfied that we have given glory to God through it.

I am amazed that this is so, and have asked God to show me what has changed in me that I can think that way. The answer I believe I received is that I have now come to see Ohev's Shabbat service (and other services as well) as our service to God rather than ministry to ourselves. As I began to think about it, I realized that that is right. I used to evaluate a service based on how I fared in it. Did it speak to my needs? Did I experience the presence of the Spirit? Did I learn something in the course of it? Did I leave the service uplifted or, better yet, healed? Now there is nothing wrong with any of those benefits, but I now understand that they are extras, and not what Jewish Services are fundamentally for. Jewish services are first and foremost to fulfill the Jewish covenantal responsibility of rendering priestly service to God, and secondarily to others. Much of what is contained in a modern Jewish service is intended to express Israel's responsibility for *Torah* obedience, and to be analogous to the services conducted by the *Kohanim* in the Holy Temple. I don't mean the synagogue services that were ancillary to the Temple – I mean the sacrifices of the Temple proper.

You may already know this but, if not, allow me to explain that the synagogue's origin is reputed to date from the Babylonian exile, at a time when the Jews were far from Jerusalem and unable to perform the requisite Temple sacrifices. When the exile ended and the Jews returned to Jerusalem, the synagogue continued as an institution of prayer and study, parallel but secondary in importance to the Temple. The synagogue reached its full expression during Yeshua's lifetime, but became Judaism's main center of social and religious life after the Second Temple's destruction in 70 A.D. In the absence of the Temple and with the Jews' resulting inability to sacrifice, the leading rabbis of their day developed a substitute which consisted of prescribed prayers, to be recited in synagogues at the exact same time of day as the Temple sacrifices. This is the origin of the *Shachrit*, *Minchah*, and *Ma'ariv* services on weekdays, and the added *Musaf* service on *Shabbat*. This is also the origin of the modern Jewish service that consists of reading designated portions of Scripture and praying specific prayers in a specified order.

Now there are two ways to look at this. One way is to be critical of the rabbis and say that their rejection of Yeshua as God's replacement for certain Temple sacrifices is what created the crisis that caused them to establish (what was essentially) a new Jewish religion modeled after the Temple. But another way to look at it is to say that, even had the rabbis received Yeshua as their sacrificed Messiah, their response in establishing an institution around which Jewish life and memory of the Temple could be preserved would nevertheless have been appropriate. In my opinion, the rabbis probably did the right thing despite their rejection of Yeshua. That is why I support modeling our services after the liturgical plan of the ancients; provided, however, that we add Yeshua in, incorporate contemporary forms where they are effective, and make whatever

changes are needed to accommodate New Covenant realities. It should go without saying but I'll say it anyway, that praying with *kavanah* (i.e. with prayerful intention) is absolutely necessary if our prayers are to be effective.

I have not always looked at things this way, so that is why I am now at peace with our service being substantially liturgical, whereas years ago I was not. If it is valuable for us to model our services after those of the ancient synagogue, then our services have to be liturgical because the early synagogues' services were liturgical. But even more foundationally, Messianic synagogues, like all synagogues, should seek to help the Jewish people fulfill their God-given covenant to be priests; as we read in Exodus 19:6: "*be a kingdom of cohanim for me, a nation set apart.*" The Holy Temple of God expressed that priestly mandate through its sacrifices and intercessory prayers, and that is what the synagogue was designed to do when it was first modeled after the Temple.

I know that praying liturgically is not everyone's preferred way of praying to God; frankly, it isn't mine either and, when I pray privately, I usually do not pray from the *Siddur*. However, the purpose of praying privately is not the same as when we join together as a community. When we attend services in the synagogue, the prayers and proceedings chosen by the synagogue's leaders should not be an overwhelming issue to the rest of us any more than such things were for the priests who ministered in the Temple. Imagine this if you can: The Temple's *Cohanim* show up for work one morning and get into complaining about how repetitious their work is:

"Why do we have to do the same sacrifices day in and day out? Why do we have to always conduct them in the same way and at the same time each day? Why do we have to sing the same Psalms each day? We know that the *Shechinah's* presence has not been the same since this Temple was rebuilt,<sup>1</sup> but still, we know God's Spirit is here, so why can't we be free in His Spirit to dance and jump and sing when the urge comes upon us? In fact, why can't we just suspend the sacrifices every so often so we can bathe in the Glory of God? Surely God would want our needs to be met, and our Temple's services to be uplifting and exciting for the Israelites who bring their sacrifices here."

I think you know what would happen if they did that and said that. Zaap! Down would come fire from heaven and they would quickly experience the departure from routine that they asked for.

No, the Temple was not a place to be uplifted and have fun. For the priests it was a place to render service to both God and worshipers amidst a river of blood, and the carcasses of slain animals. For the Israelites who brought their sacrifices, it was a place where death was exchanged for atoning life; a place from which they were expected to return home with repentant hearts, sobered by knowing that animals had to die because of their sins. No, the Temple was not a place to have fun, but rather to repent, worship God, and render priestly service.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Resh Lakish is recorded in Yoma 9b of the Babylonian Talmud, as saying that, because the Ark and the Tablets did not repose in the Second Temple, the *Shechinah* did not abide there.

In the same way, synagogue services (including Messianic services) are not primarily for the purpose of our being ministered to and certainly not for the purpose of our having fun. If we **are** ministered to, or we **do** enjoy services, so much the better; but it is not their purpose. Similar to the Holy Temple, synagogues are places where service is rendered to God through worship and praise, and to men (including to ourselves) through intercessory prayer. They are places where serious spiritual transactions take place and, in the case of **Messianic** synagogues, are similar to the Temple in that the ministry that takes place in them relies on blood sacrifice – not of animals, but of Yeshua our Messiah. There is an additional feature in Messianic synagogues that make them unique, and that is the presence of the Holy Spirit – reminiscent of the *Shechinah* who dwelt in Solomon’s Temple.

By its nature, liturgy is both prescribed and repetitious. Critics of liturgy often quote Matthew 6:7 where Yeshua is quoted as saying to his disciples:

*"And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do..."*

The argument these critics make is that established prayers that are repeated regularly are prayers said in vain and, therefore, praying liturgically is also in vain. Of course, the argument evaporates two verses later where, beginning with verse 9, Yeshua prescribes specific words for us to pray:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." (Matthew 6:9-13).*

We should also take note of Yeshua’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, that imply repetition of what has come to be known as the *Shulchan Adonai*:

*"... on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, **as often** as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For **as often** as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.'"*

And who among us is willing to tell the four living creatures in Revelation 4:8 that they ought to stop repeating day and night:

*"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"*

Or who among us wants to explain to the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4:11 that they are praying liturgically when they exclaim:

*"You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."*

For those of us who are still troubled by liturgy, I would like to engage in a little exercise to see if we can improve on the repetition in Psalm 136. Please respond with the repetitious line so we may appreciate the full extent of the problem and perhaps come up with ways to cure it:

*“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!  
For His mercy endures forever.  
Oh, give thanks to the God of gods!  
For His mercy endures forever.  
Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!  
For His mercy endures forever:  
To Him who alone does great wonders,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
To Him who by wisdom made the heavens,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
To Him who laid out the earth above the waters,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
To Him who made great lights,  
For His mercy endures forever--  
The sun to rule by day,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
The moon and stars to rule by night,  
For His mercy endures forever.  
To Him who struck Egypt in their firstborn,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
And brought out Israel from among them,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
With a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
To Him who divided the Red Sea in two,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
And made Israel pass through the midst of it,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
But overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
To Him who led His people through the wilderness,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
To Him who struck down great kings,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
And slew famous kings,  
For His mercy endures forever--  
Sihon king of the Amorites,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
And Og king of Bashan,  
For His mercy endures forever--*

*And gave their land as a heritage,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
A heritage to Israel His servant,  
For His mercy endures forever.  
Who remembered us in our lowly state,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
And rescued us from our enemies,  
For His mercy endures forever;  
Who gives food to all flesh,  
For His mercy endures forever.  
Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven!  
For His mercy endures forever.”*

Yes, Psalm 136 certainly has a problem that needs fixing. If anyone here has an idea of how we can reformulate it so as not to be so liturgically repetitious, please email your idea to [yvh@hashem.net](mailto:yvh@hashem.net) and expect to receive a response REAL SOON.