



## Sources and History of Jewish Prayer

Certainly the oldest prayer recited daily in Jewish prayer is the [Shema](#). This consists of Deut. 6:4-9, Deut. 11:13-21, and Num. 15:37-41. Note that the first paragraph commands us to speak of these matters "*when you retire and when you arise.*" This commandment is reciting twice a day, morning and evening.

The next major development in Jewish prayer occurred during the Babylonian Exile, 6th century B.C.E. People were not able to sacrifice in the Temple at that time, so they used prayer as a substitute for sacrifice. "The offerings of our lips instead of bulls," as Hosea said. People got together to pray three times a day, corresponding to the three daily sacrifices. There was an additional prayer service on Sabbath and certain holidays, to correspond to the additional sacrifices of those days. Some suggest that this may already have been a common practice among the pious before the Exile.

After the Exile, these daily prayer services continued. In the 5th century BCE, the Men of the Great Assembly composed a basic prayer, covering just about everything you could want to pray about. This is the [Amidah-Shemoneh Esrei](#), which means "18" and refers to the 18 blessings originally contained within the prayer. This prayer is the cornerstone of every Jewish service.

The blessings of the Shemoneh Esrei can be broken down into 3 groups: three blessings praising God, thirteen making requests (forgiveness, redemption, health, prosperity, rain in its season, ingathering of exiles, etc.), and three expressing gratitude and taking leave.

The 19th one the additional one One of the thirteen requests (the one against heretics) was added around the 2nd century C.E., in response to the growing threat of heresy (primarily Christianity), but at that time, the prayer was already commonly known as the 18 blessings, and the name stuck, even though there were now 19 blessings.

Another important part of certain prayer services is a reading from the Torah (first 5 books of the Bible) and the Prophets. The Torah has been divided into 54 sections, so that if each of these sections is read and studied for a week, we can cover the entire Torah in a year every year (our leap years are 54 weeks long; regular years are 50 or so, we double up shorter portions on a few weeks in regular years. At various times in our history, our oppressors did not permit us to have public readings of the Torah, so we read a roughly corresponding section from the Prophets (referred to as a *Haftarah*). Today, we read both the Torah portion and the *Haftarah* portion. These are read on Mondays, Thursdays, Sabbath and some holidays. The Torah and *haftarah* readings are performed with great ceremony: the Torah is paraded around the room before it is brought to rest on the (*bimah*) podium, and it is considered an honor to have the opportunity to recite a blessing over the reading (this honor is called an *aliyah*). For more information, see Torah Readings.

That's the heart of the Jewish prayer service. There are a few other matters that should be mentioned, though. There is a long series of morning blessings at the beginning of the morning service. Some people recite these at home. They deal with a lot of concerns with getting up in the morning, and things we are obligated to do daily. There is a section called (*Pesukei d'Zimra*) verses of song, which includes a lot of Psalms and hymns. I like to think of it as a warm-up, getting you in the mood for prayer in the morning.

There are also a few particularly significant prayers. The most important is the *Kaddish*, the only prayer in Aramaic to my knowledge, which praises God. Here's a small piece of it, in English:

May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days, and in the lifetimes of the entire family of Israel, swiftly and soon. May His great Name be blessed forever and ever. Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, mighty...

There are several variations on it for different times in the service. One variation is set aside for mourners to recite, the congregation only providing the required responses. Many people think of the *Kaddish* as a mourner's prayer, because the oldest son is obligated to recite it for a certain period after a parent's death, but in fact it is much broader than that. Someone once told me it separates each portion of the service, and a quick glance at any siddur (daily prayer book) shows that it is recited between each section, but I don't know if that is its purpose.

Another important prayer is *Aleinu*, which is recited at or near the end of every service. It also praises God. Here is a little of it in English, to give you an idea:

It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the Molder of primeval creation, for He has not made us like the nations of the lands... Therefore, we put our hope in you, Lord our God, that we may soon see Your mighty splendor... On that day, the Lord will be One and His Name will be One.

Most holidays, we also recite *Hallel*, which consists of Psalms 113-118. Many holidays have special additions to the liturgy. See Yom Kippur Liturgy for additions related to that holiday.