

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>
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Topic: *Tefillah* (Prayer) and *Tzedakah* (Charity)

Key Idea: As we noted in our study of the traditions of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, prayer (*tefilla*) and righteousness a/k/a “charity” (*tzedakah*) are believed to have enormous power to shape Divine will and human destiny. Personal prayer has been known from as far back as the Bible, and most likely before. Human beings almost instinctively turn to God when they are faced with circumstances beyond their control, in the hope of divine intervention. Among these individual prayers are “deals” with God and pleas for rescue and assistance, as well as prayers of praise and gratitude. Petition, praise and thanks are three components of structured prayer, but the priority and degree that each of the three is present, exemplified in formalized prayer, may vary in personal private prayer.

As far back as the Hebrew prophets (5-9th century BCE) the notion that prayer alone was insufficient to positively influence divine intervention, but also required righteous action on the part of the petitioner became attached to prayer. *Tzedakah* (from the same Hebrew root as righteous) is often translated as “charity,” but is intended to be a more encompassing concept and standard of behavior.

Our discussion of the texts:

Suppl. text 1: Genesis 28:10-22. God becomes the “God of Jacob.”

Suppl. text 2: I Samuel 1:1-20. Hannah prays in the sanctuary for a son.

Text 1: Psalm 13; 8; 100.

Psalm 13. David feels abandoned and **petitions** to God to rescue him from his enemies.

Psalm 8. David **praises** God for his greatness, for defeating his enemies, and for entrusting humanity with His creations.

Psalm 100. David calls upon all the earth not just to praise God but to express **thanks** to Him for His kindness.

Text 2: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 1:2.* Each day every person is obligated to **petition** God and ask for anything they lack, and to give **praise** as well as **thanks**. These are the three elements of *tefilla*.

Text 3: Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah.” How do we define our needs? Prayer helps us understand what our genuine needs are, beyond material gratification and pleasure, so we can ask for them. Praise and thanks are secondary—God does not need them, we do.

Text 4: Abraham Joshua Heschel, “An Invitation to God.” Prayer is not primarily about petition and supplication, but inviting God to intervene in our lives. Prayer should focus not on our dependence and needs, but rather our praise of God’s majesty and glory.

Text 5: The *Amidah* prayer. How the *Shmonah Esrei* (18 benedictions), in its weekday form (petitionary berakhot are not recited on Shabbat or festivals) epitomizes the structure of prayer discussed above.

Text 6: Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 26b. Two explanations for establishing the three daily prayer services—the prayers offered by our ancestors, and as a reminder and reenact ion of the daily offerings brought to the ancient Jerusalem Temple.

Text 7: Carol Ochs and Kerry M. Olitsky, “Why Do We Pray?” The distinction between reciting prayers and praying.

Suppl. text: Chava Weissler, “Prayers in Yiddish and the Religious World of Ashkenazic Women” (in Judith R. Baskin, ed., *Jewish Women: Historical Perspectives*).

The distinctiveness of *tkhines* as prayers for women can be thrown into greater relief by comparing them to the standard liturgy. *Tkhines* are quite different from the prayers of the Hebrew liturgy, which are regulated by clock and calendar: morning, afternoon and evening prayers, weekday Sabbath, and festival prayers. The prayers of the siddur (the Hebrew prayer book) are most typically phrased in the plural: by preference they are recited in public, in the midst of the worshipping community, defined primarily as a community of men. *Tkhines*, by contrast, were almost always phrased in the singular and often had space for the petitioner to insert her own name, thus making her address to God intensely personal. Furthermore, *tkhines* were voluntary prayers, recited when the woman wished and most typically at home. And although *tkhines* were voluntary, we can reasonably assume if a *tkhine* exists for a particular event—and especially if many *tkhines* exist for an event—that that event had religious significance for at least some women.

From *Tkhines*, Amsterdam, 1648. [The woman] says this when she puts the loaf of *berkhes* (Western European Yiddish word for the Shabbat bread called *challa* by Eastern European Yiddish speaking Jews) into the oven:

“Lord of all the world, in your hand is all blessing. I come now to revere your holiness, and I pray you to bestow your blessing on the baked goods. Send an angel to guard the baking, so that all will be well-baked, will rise nicely, and will not burn, to honor the holy Sabbath, which you have chosen so that Israel your children may rest thereon, and over which one recites the holy blessing—as you blessed the dough of Sarah and Rebecca our mothers. My Lord God, listen to my voice: you are the God who hears the voices of those who call to you with the whole heart. May you be praised to eternity.”

Text 8: Isaiah 58:1-10. A reminder that prayer and fasting must be combined with acts of righteousness and loving-kindness.

Text 9: Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 10a. The importance of combining prayer with *tzedakah*.

Suppl. text: Traditional *Yizkor* prayer.

Text 10: *Kli Ykar*, Deuteronomy 14:2. A medieval text on the relationship between prayer and *tzedakah*.

Text 11: *Or Tzadikim*, On Generosity. Daily *tzedakah* must be given with compassion and generosity.