

“Prayer is our
humble answer to
the inconceivable
surprise of living.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
Man's Quest for God (1954)

Prayer: Keva and Kavanna

One famous mystic taught that just as important as the black letters on the page are the white spaces that surround them. In this class, we'll explore the meaning and depth behind Jewish spiritual language, as well as the sometimes confusing choreography and customs of the synagogue.

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Prayer Mode #1: KEVA

There is a story, told by Rabbi Israel Friedman about a small Jewish town. It was far off from the main roads of the land, but it had all the necessary municipal institutions: a mikvah, a cemetery, a hospital, and a law court, as well as all sorts of craftsmen: tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, and masons. One trade, however, was lacking: There was no watchmaker.

Over the course of years, many of the clocks became so annoyingly inaccurate that their owners just decided to let them run down and ignore them altogether.

There were others, however, who maintained that as long as the clocks ran, they should not be abandoned. So they wound their clocks day after day though they knew that they were not accurate.

One day the news spread through the town that a watchmaker had arrived, and everyone rushed to him with their clocks. But the only ones he could repair were those that had been kept running. The abandoned clocks had grown too rusty!

[Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)

Man's Quest for God (1954)



From this text, what words would you use to describe keva prayer?

What is the value of keva prayer? What are the challenges?

How do you personally relate to the concept of keva prayer?

Prayer Mode #2: KAVANNA

There was a young shepherd who was unable to recite the Hebrew prayers. The only way in which he worshiped was, “Master of the world! You well know that if You had cattle and gave them to me to tend, though I take wages for tending from all others, from You I would take nothing, because I love You.”

One day, a learned man passing by heard the shepherd pronounce his offer and shouted at him:

“Fool, do not pray that way!” So the shepherd asked him: “How then should I pray?” So the learned man taught him all of the blessings in order, the recitation of the Sh'ma and the Amidah, so that from that point forward the shepherd would not pray the way that he used to.

But after the learned man left, the shepherd forgot all that had been taught him, and did not pray. And he was even afraid to say what he had been accustomed to say, because the learned man had told him not to. One night, the learned man had a dream, and in it he heard a voice: “If you do not tell the shepherd to say what he was accustomed to saying before you came to him, know that misfortune will overtake you, for you have robbed Me of one of My most precious blessings.”

At once the learned man went to the shepherd and said to him: “What prayer are you now making?” The shepherd answered: “None, for I have forgotten what you taught me, and you forbade me to say ‘If you had cattle...’”

Then the learned man told him what he had dreamed, and said: “Please, say what you used to say.” Behold, here is a person who had neither Torah nor words; he only had it in his heart to do good, and this was esteemed in heaven. “The Compassionate One desires the Heart” (Sanhedrin 106a).

Rabbi Yehudah he-Hasid (12th century, Germany)

Quoted in Heschel, *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism* (1959)



From this text, what words would you use to describe kavanna prayer?

What is the value of kavanna prayer? What are the challenges?

How do you personally relate to the concept of kavanna prayer?

Keva: The Structure of Prayer

THE BASIC SERVICE

WARM-UP

Blessings and psalms that help us enter into prayer

SH'MA & BLESSINGS

Barkhu

Call to prayer

Maariv Aravim/Yotzer Or

Creation

Ahavat Olam/Ahavah Raba

Revelation

SH'MA

The Jewish declaration of faith

Mi Chamocho

Redemption

Hashkeveinu (evening)

Peace

AMIDAH

Our standing audience with God

TORAH READING

(Shabbat, Monday and Thursday mornings)

CONCLUSION

Aleinu

The closing prayer of gratitude for being Jewish

Kaddish

The prayer recited in memory of the deceased

TIMES FOR PRAYER

MA'ARIV

Evening

SHACHARIT

Morning

MINCHA

Afternoon

JUST ON SHABBAT

KABBALAT SHABBAT

Before Maariv on Shabbat evening

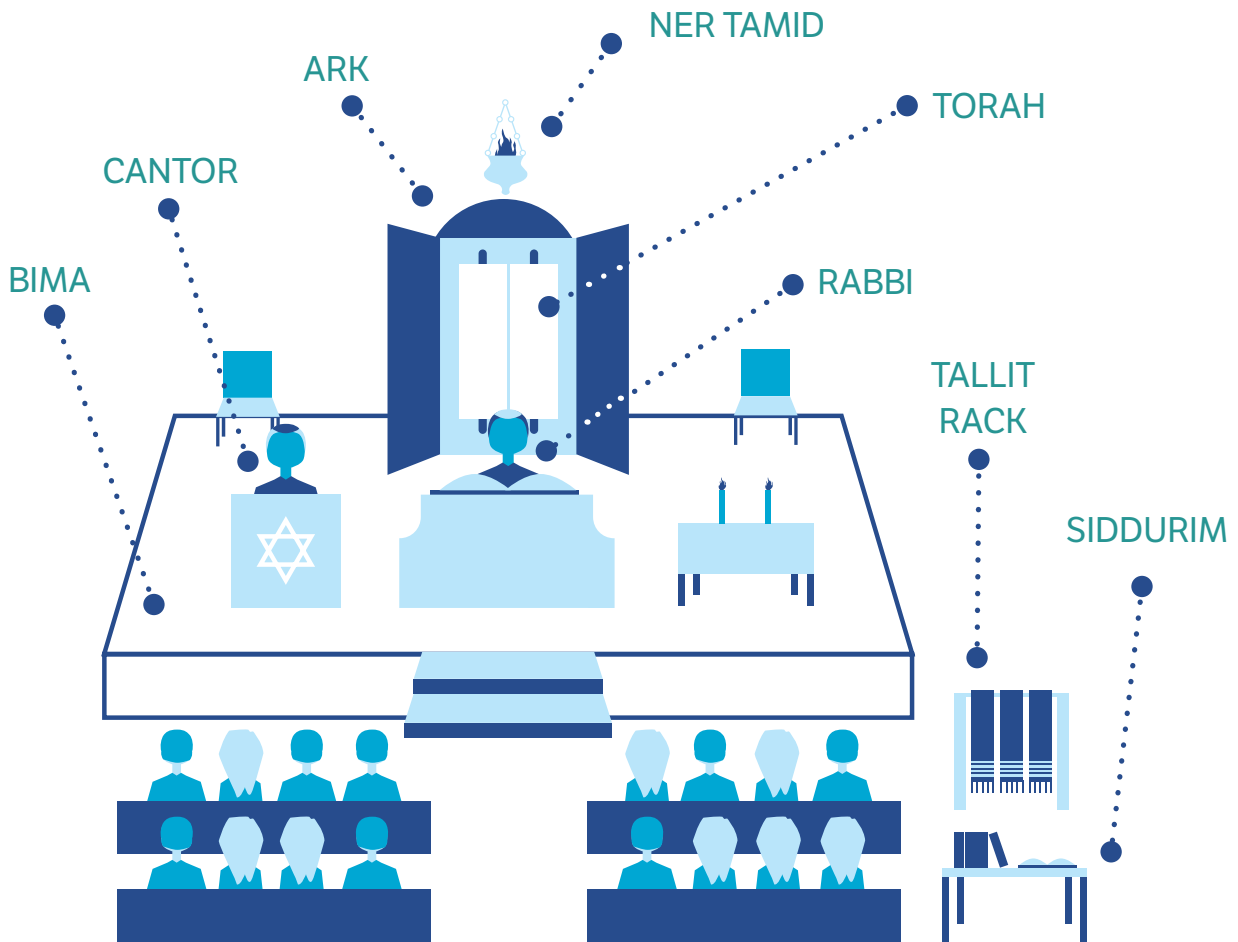
MUSAF

After Shacharit on Shabbat and holiday mornings.

HAVDALAH

The closing service for Shabbat

Synagogue Geography



SIDDUR

The prayerbook

KIPPAH/YAMULKE

The head covering

TALLIT & TZITZIT

The prayer shawl and tied fringes, symbolic of the 613 mitzvot

TEFILIN

The leather boxes and straps (worn only on weekdays), containing the words of the Sh'ma

MINYAN

Quorum of ten adult Jews needed to pray

DAVEN

To pray (verb, Yiddish)

ALIYAH

The honor of going up to the Torah to bless a portion of the reading

HAGBA & G'LILA

To honor of lifting (hagba) or dressing (g'lila) the Torah scroll

Kavanna: Talking to God

Rabbi Naomi Levy

What are we to do when the prayer book does not contain the words we are searching for? What do we do when certain feelings well up inside us, but the words to express them are absent from our liturgies?

I first started writing my own prayers when I was pregnant with my son. Pregnancy is a miraculous experience, and there was so much I wanted to say to God. I wanted to give thanks; I wanted to tell God about my worries, my hopes, my awful morning sickness. I wanted to pray for the health of my child.

So I found myself talking to God each day, and soon I was writing down new prayer after prayer. And I have never stopped. The process of writing these prayers became a source of enormous joy and comfort. It helped calm my fears as I approached labor and delivery. I could talk to God in plain English, without any pretense. I could enter into an intimate relationship with God.

Some people are shocked when I encourage them to supplement their traditional prayers with personal, spontaneous ones. They assume that making any change to the prayer service is forbidden. But they are mistaken. Composing personal prayers is not a sin, it's a blessing. It is a way to restore our communication with God. Where do you think all the prayers in the prayer book came from? They weren't written in heaven. They were created by human beings who were filled with awe and who wanted to share their thoughts and feelings with God. Religious expression is not some relic from the past. We should never hesitate to give voice to our souls.

"Pray for me, Rabbi" is probably the most common request I hear from those who come to see me. My response is always, "Of course I will, but I need your help."

And I encourage the person seated before me to tell me what he or she wants me to say to God. Inevitably, the most heartfelt and beautiful words of prayer issue forth from the very mouth that had previously been unable to pray. Stunned and proud, the individual returns to the world blessed with the gift of personal prayer.

It is remarkable to see what can emerge from us when we stop trying to pray to God and start talking to God instead. Too often, we envision prayer as something saintly and proper. Something that has strict rules and standards. We get intimidated and inhibited. But talking to God is a very natural and intimate experience. We can talk to God anywhere: in the shower, in the car, at work, in bed. We don't need to sound smart or polished. We don't need to ask anyone else to do it for us.

From [Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration](#) (2003). Used with permission of the author.



Rabbi Naomi Levy is the founding rabbi of Nashuva, a spiritual community dedicated to Jewish outreach. She is the author of several books, including [Hope Will Find You: My Search for the Wisdom to Stop Waiting and Start Living](#) (2010).

Letters to God

Based on a teaching of Rabbi Elie Spitz

This innovative exercise in kavanna comes from Rabbi Elie Spitz, rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, CA and a noted teacher of Jewish spirituality and meditation. It is based on the practice, dating back to the 18th century, of placing a *kvittle*, or “little note” in between the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Write a letter to God.

Use this space, or another paper if you want to keep it very private. Don't worry about what you believe or don't believe — you can address it to God, the Universe, or To Whom it May Concern.

Answer your letter as if it were God writing back to you.

Again, don't judge what you write, rather, let your words flow spontaneously. Allow yourself to be surprised.

Brakhot

(Blessings)

The practice of saying brakhot is a way of joining together keva and kavanna — a ritual response that is spontaneously offered in a moment of true gratitude for a tasty meal, a beautiful sight, a piece of good news, or for reaching a time of celebration.

All brakhot begin with the same six-word formula:

BARUKH ATA ADONAI, ELOHEINU MELEKH HA-OLAM

Blessed	[are] You	Adonai	Our God	Ruler	[of] the Universe

Brakhot that precede performing a mitzvah (lighting Shabbat candles, sitting in a sukkah, affixing a mezuzah, etc) continue on with the follow four words:

ASHER KIDSHANU B'MITZVOTAV V'TZIVANU

Who	makes us holy	through Your mitzvot	commanding us [to]

Upon doing something for the first time or celebrating a milestone:

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, she-he-heyanu v'kiyamanu, v'higiyanu la-zman ha-zeh
Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us alive, and sustained us, and allowed us to reach this joyful moment.

Upon seeing the wonders of nature, such as a sunrise, lightning, shooting star, or beautiful vista:

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, oseh ma'aseh v'reishit
Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who continues the work of creation.

Upon seeing a rainbow:

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam zokher ha-brit ve'ne'eman bivrito v'kayam bema'amaro.
Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who remembers the covenant and Your promises.

Upon hearing good news:

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam hatov v'hamayteev.
Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who is good and does goodness.

Upon hearing bad news, including of a death:

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam dayan ha-emet
Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who judges truth.

Upon affixing a mezuzah to a doorpost:

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu likbo'a mezuzah.
Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who makes us holy through Your mitzvot, commanding us to affix a mezuzah.

Before engaging in the study of Torah:

Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah.
Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who makes us holy through Your mitzvot, commanding us to busy ourselves in the study of Torah.

When You Lie Down, and When You Rise Up

Beginning and ending our day with the briefest moment of pause and gratitude transforms the rest of the day. Below are the first words we utter in the morning, and the last before we go to sleep.

Modeh Ani

*Modeh/Modah ani lefanekha, melekh chai v'kiyam,
she'he'hezarta bi nishmati b'hemla raba emunatekha.*

I am grateful before you, Eternal One,
for restoring my soul to me. Great is your faithfulness.

Bedtime Sh'ma

Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad

Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

B'yado afkid ruchi, beit ishan v'ah'ira

V'im ruchi g'viati, Adonai li v'lo ira.

I place my spirit in your care, Adonai, when I wake and
when I sleep. God is with me, I have no fear.

Pray: 10 Ways to Build a Spiritual Practice

■ Acknowledge moments of gratitude

Count your blessings. Pause and appreciate. Breathe. You are blessed.

■ Explore synagogues in your area

If you don't yet have a spiritual home, go visit several different congregations and see where you feel most comfortable. Sometimes it takes a few tries, but when it clicks, it can change your life.

■ Recite the Bedtime Sh'ma

Saying our six-word declaration of faith before closing your eyes for the night means that every day ends on a good note, no matter what craziness came before.

■ Recite a blessing before each meal

Almost one billion people on Earth don't know for certain where their next meal will come from. If you are one of the lucky ones who has access to food, pause and express gratitude.

■ Recite Modeh Ani upon waking up

Modeh ani lefanekha, melekh chai v'kiyam, she'he'hezarta bi nishmati b'hemla raba emunatekha. This prayer thanks God for restoring our soul to us as we wake up. It is a phenomenal way to start the day positively.

■ Attend Friday evening services

From musical services with full bands to small min-yans relying on the power of the voice, there is really a Friday evening service for everybody. Find your niche and make it part of your weekly ritual.

■ Start wearing a kippah during prayer, study, and eating

Physically differentiate the sanctity of these moments by wearing a head covering. Kippot are traditional, but there is no reason why you can't rock a fedora while studying a piece of Talmud.

■ Learn and begin to use the Sheheyanu blessing for new things

For the first cherries of the summer, the first time you wear great new shoes, or upon reaching a special birthday — this is the all-purpose blessing for new things: *Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, she'he'heyanu v'kiyemanu v'higiyanu laz'man ha-zeh*

■ Attend Shabbat morning services

Sing together. Listen to your Rabbi's inspiring words. Schmooze with your community. Share a meal together.

■ Begin putting on tallit and tefilin each morning

Get all wrapped up in your Judaism. Encircling yourself in a tallit and binding tefilin onto your arm and forehead are physical ways of feeling close to God.

■ Take 15 minutes to say mincha in the afternoon

Pausing for afternoon prayer is a great way to overcome the two o'clock slump. Think about what your morning has held, and what your evening could become.

Reflection on Chapter 6



Some of the things that are challenging for me about Jewish prayer:

Some of the things that I appreciate about Jewish prayer:

The role that prayer plays in my life:

Additional Readings

Books

- The best way to familiarize yourself with the Jewish liturgy is to purchase a copy of the siddur that your synagogue uses and spend time reading it, marking it up, and making it yours. Some of the more common siddurim are:
 - *Siddur Lev Shalem* (Conservative)
 - *Mishkan Tefilah* (Reform)
 - *Kol ha-Neshama* (Reconstructionist)
 - *The Complete Artscroll Siddur* (Orthodox)
- Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*
A detailed, scholarly but readable overview of the evolution and history of Jewish prayer. A volume you will continually revisit as your knowledge and experience of the prayer service grows.
- Haim Donin, *To Pray as a Jew*
An extremely useful guide for anyone praying in an Orthodox setting. Best read together with your own copy of the siddur.
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*
In his poetic and inspiring style, Heschel addresses the question of what it really means to pray.

Websites

- *Siddur Audio* (sidduraudio.com)
Learn Jewish prayers at your own pace with this great collection of recordings, which closely follows the Conservative Movement's prayer book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*.
- *Virtual Cantor* (virtualcantor.com)
An even more comprehensive and detailed collection of Jewish prayer recordings. For those ready to take the next step in learning Jewish liturgy.