

Lesson Guide: Class Six

Prayer: Keva & Kavanna



Miller Introduction to
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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Lesson Guide for Class #6: Prayer: Keva and Kavanna

Class Summary:

Exploration of the mechanics and meaning behind Jewish prayer. Focus on the general rubrics of the prayer service, keva/kavanna, ritual garb and symbols, and comfort in the synagogue environment. Building familiarity with basic prayers and blessings—including Sh'ma, Amidah, Kaddish, and the basic blessing formula.

Note: When possible, this class should take place in a synagogue sanctuary, using the ritual items there for experiential learning.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Become familiar with the essential elements of the Jewish prayer service, including the layout of the synagogue, the use of ritual items, the structure of the prayer service, and some of the key Jewish prayers, including Sh'ma, Amidah, and Kaddish.
- Learn the practice of saying "Brakhot" and recognize and use the "Baruch ata..." formula.
- Discuss the meaning and place of prayer in their personal, spiritual lives and explore ways to connect their personal understanding of prayer with their Jewish consciousness.

Key Vocabulary:

- Aron Kodesh/Ark
- Amidah

- Brakha/Brakhot
- Cantor/Hazzan
- Keva
- Kavanna
- Kaddish
- Kippah/Yarmulke
- Ma'ariv
- Mincha
- Minyan
- Ner Tamid
- Sh'ma
- Shacharit
- Shehecheyanu
- Siddur
- Tallit
- Tefillin

In-Person Teaching Materials:

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos

- Ideally this class should be taught in a synagogue sanctuary. If not, then gather ritual items like kippot, tallit, tefillin, and siddurim.

Online Teaching Materials:

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.

- Ideally this class will be Zoomed from a synagogue sanctuary. If not, then gather ritual items like kippot, tallit, tefillin, and siddurim.

Set Induction: “Keva and Kavanna”

Explain to students that Jewish prayer comes in two “modes”: Keva and Kavanna. Rather than define these two terms, we’ll look at two parables, one about keva and one about kavanna, and generate a definition from interpreting the stories.

Break students into chavruta/small groups (if teaching online, start a breakout session) to study the text from the coursebook “Prayer Mode #1” from Heschel’s

“Man’s Quest for God.” Then, have them use the guiding questions on the facing page to discuss what is keva prayer.

Debrief the small group and make sure they understood that keva prayer is about repetition, spiritual discipline, set liturgy, etc.

Either change small groups/breakouts and send them into discussion or lead a collective discussion of Text #2: Kavanna from Sefer Hasidim. Make sure they understand that kavanna prayer is about individual expression, spontaneity, and personal intention separate from the fixed liturgy.

Explain that Jewish prayer involves bringing together both elements, using the set liturgy as a starting point to create moments of personal meaning.

Most individuals have a natural preference for one mode or another (often people from Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim backgrounds are most comfortable with keva, while most people from Protestant and “spiritual” backgrounds are more comfortable with kavanna – though not always.) Reflect as a group about what mode of prayer they feel most comfortable with and what is their “growing edge.” This can be an opportunity for journaling or a quick round of sharing with a partner/small group.

Lecture/Experience: “Keva”

In-Person: Since most Jews are likely to engage in prayer primarily in a synagogue, the first element to understanding the keva of Jewish prayer is understanding the structure of Jewish prayer space. Take the class into the synagogue sanctuary. Give them a few minutes to freely explore the area, inviting them to touch anything, open drawers, walk onto the bima, and make sure to come back with at least one question about what they've found. Then, gather the group together and allow them to ask questions.

Guide the conversation naturally to allow you to discuss "synagogue geography" — including elements like the bima, aron kodesh, ner tamid, etc. — as well as ritual objects — siddur, kippah, tallit, tefillin (demonstrate putting on the latter two.)

Be prepared to answer questions about how to feel at home in a synagogue space — when to show up, what to wear, what to do or not do — all to defuse the students' natural anxiety about showing up in a synagogue.

Online: While you can simply lecture and explain the various components of a synagogue sanctuary, if it is possible to provide a virtual tour, that would add a lot. You can either Zoom from a laptop or tablet that can be carried around the sanctuary, or you can pre-record a tour and playback the video for the class. The instructor should show items like siddur, kippah, tallit, and tefillin and demonstrate their use.

Break

Lecture: “The Siddur”

It is not possible to truly dive into the complex liturgy that makes up the Jewish prayerbook in this short amount of time. What is helpful to students is to offer an overall sense of the flow of a prayer service, as a way of helping students to gain comfort and confidence in participating in Jewish prayer.

Introduce the keva times of Jewish prayer:

- **Daily:** Shacharit (morning), Mincha (afternoon), Maariv (evening)
- **Shabbat additions:** Kabbalat Shabbat (Friday night), Musaf (added to Shacharit)

Each service follows the same basic structure and contains some common elements:

- **Warm-Up:** Generally, a collection of Psalms. In the morning, that’s called P’sukei d’Zimra. On Friday night, that is called Kabbalat Shabbat.
- **Sh’ma and its Blessings:** In both the morning and evening service, the next unit is centered on the Sh’ma, with blessings before and after affirming the basic principles of Jewish faith (Creation, Revelation, and Redemption.)
- **Amidah:** The center point of any prayer service is the Amidah — the private, standing audience with God. Here it may be valuable to explore basic choreography — the Amidah is said standing. It begins with three steps forward and a bow from the knees and concludes with taking three steps backward and a triple bow from the knees going left, right, and then in the center.
- **Closing:** The two most important prayers in this section are Aleinu, which expresses gratitude for the gift of being Jewish and hopes for a redeemed future in which all people will know God’s Oneness, and the Mourner’s Kaddish, which gives those who are grieving the opportunity to publicly remember their loved ones.

Text Study/Experience: “Kavanna”

Having talked about the keva aspects of Jewish prayer (elements of a synagogue, structure of the liturgy), transition to talking about kavanna – the personal, expressive, unscripted elements of Jewish prayer.

Either read together or in small groups (if teaching online, use breakouts) the excerpt from Rabbi Naomi Levy, *Talking to God* found in the coursebook. Discussion question: When and how do you pray on your own? What is powerful for you about personal prayer? What is challenging for you?

Option #1: Letters to God

Provide students an individual experience of kavanna-style prayer, using the “Letters To and From God” activity created by Rabbi Elie Spitz. The instructions are found in the coursebook:

Students will have 5-8 minutes to compose a personal letter to God, either using the space in the book or on scratch paper. Then, students will have 5-8 minutes to answer their letter, as if it were God writing back.

If you are teaching online, encourage students to turn off their cameras to give them privacy while writing (this tends to be an emotional exercise for people). Play reflective music to hold the space and to set basic time parameters (when the first song ends, switch from writing to God to responding as God.)

While these letters ought to be kept private, debriefing the experience together is essential. What did students find meaningful? Surprising? How could they imagine applying it to their prayer life?

Option #2: Brakhot

Another option is to focus on the practice of brakhot, which provides a fixed (keva) liturgical framework to bring spiritual intention (kavanna) to all the moments of our lives.

Introduce the practice brakhot with *Asher Yatzar* (text provided in the slide deck). Ask students the impact of bringing mindful attention even to something as ordinary as using the bathroom? Look at other examples of blessings from the

coursebook and ask for them to brainstorm moments in their lives that could be sanctified with a blessing.

Conclude with teaching the shehecheyanu. Video provided in the slide deck.

Wrap Up and Reflection

Journal Prompt: "Some of the things that are challenging for me about Jewish prayer are..." and "Some of the things that I appreciate about Jewish prayer are..."

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to articulate the distinction between keva and kavanna, should be able to describe some of the major features of the synagogue and elements of the prayer service, and should demonstrate an appreciation for the value of personal, kavanna prayer in Jewish life.

At Home Work

Students should be told to watch the "Keva and Kavanna" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.



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

Fixed. Disciplined. Repetitive.

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

Keva prayer is like a regular workout, you don't necessarily see daily effects, but it has over-all power. An element of keva is necessary to allow for communal worship; without keva, there would be no prayer book, no services, no synagogues. Keva provides ways to respond to life's challenges and blessings that have stood the test of time, rather than simply what an individual can think up on the spot.

On the other hand, keva can become boring, burdensome, or automatic. It can be hard to engage in an activity that doesn't seem to be meaningful and, at its worst, can distract from being able to actually talk to God.

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



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

Intentional. Spontaneous. Personal.

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

Kavanna prayer is about authentic connection with God, connecting to God using one's own words and one's own thoughts. It comes from a personal place, so it reflects the authentic circumstances of each person. It is not bound by the words of the prayer book or any religious authority, it emerges uniquely from each individual.

On the other hand, kavanna prayer is entirely personal and spontaneous, so it does not create or sustain community. It places a substantial burden on the worshiper in each generation to generate their own prayers without giving them roots in a larger spiritual tradition. If one waits until they feel the spontaneous desire to pray, they may never learn how.

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