

Ten *Eytzot* For Seven *Berachot*: Background to Teaching the Amidah

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The following contains some information and perspectives that the teacher should bear in mind while teaching this unit.

1. Recall the origin and meaning of the names of this prayer—Amida—standing prayer, *Hatefilah*—the prayer, *Shemoneh Esrey*—the eighteen benedictions. Note the unclear origins of the Amidah. According to the Talmud: “One hundred twenty elders, among whom were many prophets, drew up eighteen blessings.” (*Megilah* 17b). While themes and some phrasing for the *berachot* were developed during the first Temple period, it was not until its destruction that the order of the prayer was set, concluding in the late first century with the addition of the eighteenth blessing, the blessing against Apostates. Simeon Hapakuli and Shmuel Hakatan are said to have established the order of the *berachot* at Yavneh (T.B. *Berachot* 28b). (You will need to fit this into the students’ understanding of the Babylonian exile and Babylonian Jewish society.) But even after this time, the exact wording remained fluid until the creation of the earliest siddurim, centuries later. Note Rabbi Amram and his siddur as the earliest version concerning which we have information. Note that even with the inclusion of the nineteenth berachah, the prayer retained its name, the *Shemoneh Esrey*. The Amidah is often described as **the** central prayer of the service—referred to as “**the** prayer” or “*hatefilah*” in traditional sources.

2. Know that the Amidah is recited traditionally twice aloud each day, during *Shaharit* and at *Minhah*, and once **silently** at *Ma'ariv*, because it was not originally obligatory then. In addition, on Shabbat, in those congregations that recite an additional or *musaf* service, they also recite the Amidah aloud during that additional service. Know the overall structure of each Amidah: it is always in three sections; Praise, Petition or Sanctification, and Acknowledgement. The structure differs between weekday and Shabbat; there is no petitionary prayer on Shabbat—instead we include the sanctification of the day. Examine the categories of Praise, Petition/Sanctification, and Thanks, and look at how the Amidah focuses on each. Prepare diagrams of the differences so students can visualize them. Provide copies, or have the students copy these charts from the board. Note that the first three and last three brachot remain the same on weekdays and Shabbat. (A good chart of the comparative structure of Amidot can be found in *Higher and Higher: Making Jewish Prayer Part of Us*, Steven M. Brown, U.S.C.J., 1980, pg. 112.)

3. Be aware of the *minhag* and *halakah* of prayer, the liturgy, and the choreography of the service; for example, the issue of bowing during the Amidah. The Talmud offers the following guidelines for the *halakah* of when to bow during the Amidah: “Our Rabbis taught: These are the *berachot* during which a person may bow: at the beginning and end of the *Avot* and at the beginning and end of the Thanksgiving (*Modim*). If one wants to bow at the end and the beginning of each *berachah*, we instruct that one does not bow.” (*Berachot* 34a). The rabbis did not want one to show excessive humility, which might be misconstrued as trying to ingratiate oneself with God or the community unnecessarily. Demonstrate the choreography; the correct position for entering into the Amidah (taking three steps forwards—first take three steps backward, if needed, given constraints of space),

and the correct bowing form (bend the knees at *Baruh*, bow at the waist for *Atah*, and straighten up for *Adonay*. Know the customs in your congregation.

4. Be familiar with the categories of *keva* or fixed prayer, and *kavanah*, intention or inner focus, which are in tension, especially in the Amidah. (See the article by Segar and Traiger on the *Matbe'ah*). The fixed form and recitation of set liturgy is juxtaposed to the status of this prayer, the emotional high point of the service for personal communion with God. Recall also that the fixed form is not so firmly fixed: there are optional additional prayers which can be added, and places where personal reflections are suggested. Note the optional Traveler's Prayer—*Tefilat Hadereh*, The Prayer for *Parnasah* (sustenance and well-being), and the healing prayer for one who is ill—*Refu'ah*; all are found in most traditional daily siddurim (also included in *Kol Haneshamah: Limot Hol*).

5. Consider the questions that arise with the very personal nature of the communion that occurs in the Amidah. Note the formal language that is used, such as in addressing a sovereign. Is the personal nature of the prayer in conflict with the formal language for addressing God as a sovereign? Consider why this difference exists and what it says to us.

6. Consider the practical nature of the form of the Amidah—with a repetition aloud in some cases (see pages 294-320), and summarization by a shorter form in another *berakah* in others (see pages 108-109). Use *Magen Avot* (page 110-111) as the focal point of study for the substitute shorter form, and the Reader's repetition (*Hazarat Hashatz*, page 294-320) for the repetition.

7. Be aware of the form and content of the traditional Amidot for Shabbat, and the changes made in *Kol Haneshamah*. (i.e., removal of the concept of resurrection of the dead/*mekayey hametim*). Also, be aware of the differences between the Shabbat and daily Amidah, both in *Kol Haneshamah* and in traditional texts.

8. Give some consideration to incorporating into this unit the definition of what makes up a *berakah*. For background on the minimum requirements of the three parts of a *berakah*, see Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 40b, in which the three-part formulation of a *berakah* for grace over eating bread is discussed. If possible, learn the melody taught by Rabbi Shefa Gold for singing the *berakah* given there, "*Brih rahamanah malka de'alma marey de hay pita.*" And refresh your recollection of the *musah* or mode of chanting/singing the *Amidot*, and at least one of the popular melodies for *Magen Avot*.

9. In light of the historic development of the Amidah, recall that the Amidah is **in place** of the Temple sacrifices. In this light, review the concept of sacrifices in Temple times. Focus on both animal and other types of sacrifices (grain, wine, honey, etc.) in Judaism. Look also at **when** sacrifices were made (Jewish festivals, *tamid* [regularly], for guilt, for *shalem* [peace], for well-being, etc.) and what kinds. Look also to the "hierarchy" of acceptable sacrifices; i.e., if one did not have a bull, one could offer two birds, if one did not have a bird, one could offer grain.

10. Recall the fixed nature of the prayers, as well as the lateness with which that canonization occurred in Jewish history. Use the multiplicity of prayers that were suggested for concluding meditations as the springboard for this discussion. Incorporate information on the history of the written form of the siddur at the time of Rabbi Amram and subsequently. (Note the play by Daniel Brenner on this subject.)