Prayer has always been central to the Jewish religious experience. Nearly every great biblical character is depicted as praying to God. A central feature of Rabbinic Judaism is the transition from Temple to Synagogue and the development of fixed forms of prayer and benediction. The medieval philosophers examined how a perfect deity could be influenced by human petition, while the mystics viewed prayer as a powerful theurgical rite. The Lurianic kabbalists created a complex meditative praxis linked to specific words of prayer, while the early hasidic masters saw prayer as an opportunity to focus on Divine Unity and the dissolution of the ego. The modern period, characterized by skepticism and religious uncertainty, had great difficulty with prayer, but recently there has been a surprising return to prayer as a powerful vehicle of meditative contemplation and emotional expression. Our course will examine the significance of Jewish prayer in all its theological richness and historical diversity. Our focus will be not so much on the texts of Siddur but on the interplay between prayer and the broader currents of Jewish thought and religious culture in each period.

Class requirements:
- One-page summaries of the prayer theology/practice of each unit
- Oral presentation on a prayer theology that differs from your own, making an effort to highlight its strong points; then present a prayer theology congenial with your personal views, highlighting a difficulty or challenge it poses. **Allotted time: ten minutes**
- Final paper, as follows: Choose a contemporary or recently published siddur or mahzor, —for example, Mishkan T'filah; Koren; Kohenet; Sim Shalom; B'chol L'vavcha; Kol Haneshamah; Artscroll; Renewal/Open Siddur; etc. Read and analyze the **introduction**, annotations, selection and arrangement of the prayers, and describe the explicit or implicit theology of prayer articulated. Clarify how the siddur you have chosen continues and diverges from the various theologies we have been studying in class. Length: 8-10 pages

**Week #1. Introduction: Biblical antecedents**—prayer, blessings and sacrifice in the Bible.
- The meaning of **berakhah** in Tanakh.
  - **Biblical prayer.** Gen. 12:8 (Abraham calls upon the Name); Gen. 18:23-33 (Abraham intercedes for Sodom); Gen. 20:7,17 (Abraham prays for Abimelekh); Gen. 24:12-15 (Abraham’s servant); Gen. 25:21 (Isaac prays for Rebecca to have a child); Gen. 32:10-13 (Jacob’s prayer for deliverance from Esau);
  - Offerings, prayer and changing God’s mind: Noah’s **olah**. Compare Gen. 8:22 with Gen. 6:5 (the rationale for destruction is incorporated into the return to favor). Now read Exodus 32-34. Compare 32:9 with 34:9. Note the term **va-yinahem**; cf. with Noah in Genesis.
  - Encounter between God and Moshe at 32:17-23. God wants intimacy. Interplay between Moshe’s personal quest and his heightened empowerment for leadership. The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (a talmudic term)
• Num. 12:13 (Moses intercedes for Miriam); Deut. 3:23-25 (Moses pleads to enter the Promised Land); Moses’s gift to the people?
• I Samuel 1:11-16, 27, 2:1-10 (Hannah’s prayers). → What changes immediately after Hannah prays (v. 18).
• I Kings 8 (Solomon’s prayer)
• I Kings 18:36-37 (Elijah’s prayer—“God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Aneini…”); 18:42 (Elijah posture);
Confessional affirmations: “A wandering Aramean was my father….”

**Psalms: The spirituality of the physical.** Ps. 16:8—shiviti ...ki mi-yemini…; 18:37—You have enlarged my steps. 25:15; 26:12; 31:9, 32:8 “I will wink at you” (Rashi); 36:8-13 (Divine wings vs. ‘foot of pride’); 38:17; 40:9—Torah in ‘mevai’; 81:7; 94:18; 139.

**Week #2. The transition to Second Temple Judaism.**
• Daniel 6:11 (praying three times daily while facing Jerusalem);
• Prayer without an overt answer: Ezra 9:6-15; Neh. 1:4-11.
• Neh. 8: 6 (Ezra blesses “the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands”—an early version of Birkat ha-Torah);
• Neh. 9:5—10:1—prayer/blessing as statement of faith and religious/national identity. Notice the pattern of Creation—Redemption—Revelation here. (Why does Redemption precede Revelation? How does this pattern change in the rabbinic period?) I Chron. 16:36 (“Blessed by the Lord God of Israel for ever and ever; and all the people said Amen and praised the Lord”—note the similarity to rabbinic berakhah except for malkhut); I Chron. 29:10;
• Esther: “…fast on my behalf….”

The notion of blockages: Lamentations 3:8—“Though I would cry out and plead, He shut out my prayer.”; Lam. 3:44—You wrapped yourself [Sakos] in a cloud [so] that no prayer can pass [Me-Avor].[see brachot 32b]—(Cf. Ex. 33:22—“When my glory [=Kavod] will pass by [Avor]… I will cover you with my palm [Ve-Sakos] until I pass….)

Two prophetic trajectories: Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah 23:23—“Am I a God near at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off?”


**The transition to rabbinic Judaism—from Temple to synagogue.**
Second Temple and Rabbinic Prayer. → Tefillah in correspondence to the Temple Service—but what does the Temple service mean?


→ see esp. the depiction of the Water-Rites as “ritual from Creation” (pp. 82-83) and the setting of the willow-tree at the Altar (pp. 84-86) and the יָשָׁה יֵתֶם הַשָּׁרוֹן יַעֲשֶׂה—סֹכָה of Levenson, “Jerusalem Temple in Devotional and Visionary Experience”; Goldhill, Temple in Jerusalem.

**Offering as gift:** Marcel Mauss; Lewis Hyde, “The Gift Must Always Move”; Maurice Godelier, The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property;


**Pilgrimage:** Coleman and Elsner, “Exile and Return: Jewish Pilgrimage”
Weeks #3-4. Prayer in the Mishnah and Talmud. The central rabbinic prayer: Tefillah/Amidah ("Shemoneh Esreh"). The structure of a berakhah. The first three berakhot.

The petitionary berakhot. The concluding three berakhot. Mediated/un-mediated prayer in the Amidah

The Shema and her berakhot. Creation—Revelation—Redemption

Berakhot 3a—Rabbi Yose says, I was once traveling on the road.….  

Berakhot 7a—Rabbi Yohanan says in the name of Rabbi Yose: How do we know that the Blessed Holy One prays? Compare with Hullin 60b “Bring a sin-offering for Me ….” – What these Talmudic passages suggest, read together, is a vision of God-in-process [see Levinas, “Kenosis”]

Berakhot 30b—31b A reverent frame of mind; Hannah’s prayer; Hannah “hurled world insolently” against Heaven….  

Shabbat 10a. Preparations for prayer. Alloting time to prayer and study.

Rosh Hashanah 17b—Rabbi Yohanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing…..

Ta’anit 19a—Hon’i the circle-drawer

Sanhedrin 22a—one must see oneself in prayer as if facing the Shekhinah

Baba Batra 25b—“…He who desires to become wise should turn to the south [when praying…]”

Yoma 53b—at the end of the Amidah, one must bow to the left, to the right, and forward, as if taking leave of one’s master….

Ta’anith 8a—Rabbi Ammi…..If you see a generation over whom the heavens are rust colored like copper so that neither dew nor rain falls, it is because that generation is wanting in people who pray softly….

→One’s prayer is heard only if you place your soul in the palm of your hand (Lam. 3:41)

Yoma 19b—“…. One who reads the Shema may neither blink with his eyes…..

Yoma 4b “….. the purpose of scripture [to separate Moshe for six days, see the sugya] was to inspire him with awe…..” Rashi: The purpose of Moshe’s separation was to isolate him from other people, so that awe should settle upon him… when he would be alone, he would discern, and set his heart [concentrate] to enter the camp of the Shekhina with awe….

Mishnah Yoma 36a—“…..and they answered after him, Blessed be the name of his glorious kingdom for ever and ever!”—

Yoma 37a—“When I make reference to the Righteous One of all the worlds, give a blessing!”

Yoma 69b—“Since they knew that God is truthful, they did not say lies about Him;” the suppression of the urge for idolatry

Baba Metzia 59b—Rabbi Eleazar said: ‘Since the Temple has been destroyed, the gates of prayer have been locked. […] [but] the gates of tears have not been locked. See Jeffrey Rubenstein, “Torah, Shame and ‘The Oven of Akhnai’” in Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture (Bloomington, 1999); and Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “When the Rabbi Weeps: On Reading Gender in Talmudic Aggadah,” Nashim 4 (2001), pp. 56-83.

The Rabbinic Culture of Blessing: acknowledgement, salutation and leave-taking.

Brakhot 17a “When the Rabbis took leave from the school of R. Ammi ….”

Yoma 53a-b: taking leave of one’s teacher as model for taking leave of the Shekhina at the end of the Amidah

Yoma 71a: When the Rabbis in Pumbeditha would take leave of each other, they would say.…..”

Mo’ed Katan 9a-b: “A disciple who has taken leave of his master and remained overnight in the city must take leave from him once again…..”

Hagigah 5b—respect for the physically challenged: “You have visited one who is seen but does not see; may you be granted to visit the One who sees but is not seen ….”

Reading: Uri Erlich, The Nonverbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach to Jewish Liturgy

Parable: The Officer of the Law and the Man in Rags (by Rabbi Mitch Chefitz)
Reading: Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997)

Alan Mintz, “Prayer and the Prayerbook”, in Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources*.

**Week #5. The medieval period.** The quest for inwardness: Rabbi Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, “Introduction.” Worship and prayer in Halevi’s *Kuzari*.

**Maimonides and prayer.**
- *Mishneh Torah. Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, Ch. 2:1-2 (love and fear of God); consider the epigraph for *Sefer Ahavah*, “The Book of Love.” What does Maimonides’ choice of verse signify?
  - *Hilkhot Tefillah* (Laws of Prayer), ch. 1; ch. 4; ch. 5.
  - *Hilkhot Ta’aniyyot* 1:1-3. Note Maimonides’ theological posture for the fast days.


**Week #6. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher: *Tur Orah Hayyim*.** Ch. 1 (*Hilkhot hanhagat adam ba-boker*); Ch. 3:1 (asking the angels to wait for us); ch. 5 (intention; how to read the Tetragrammaton); Ch. 46: 6 (berakah not mentioned in the Talmud); ch. 51:1 (music and melody in prayer); ch. 89 (prayer as first of the day); ch. 93 (preparations for prayer); ch. 98 (concentration and focus; in the presence of the Shekhina. Note terms “mitbodedim,” “hitpashtut ha-gashmiyyut.”

Ch. 101; ch. 110 (the Amidah digest= “havineinu”); ch. 125 (*Kedushah* and the Merkavah).


**Weeks #9-12. Hasidism.**
Some characteristic features of hasidic prayer include:

- Embodiment—sonic and breath theology, fervor, enthusiasm, trembling and dance
- Personification of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; romantic dance and dialogue with the letters
- *Devekut* and surrender of ego into *Ayin*
- Return to biblical models while still embracing philosophical and kabbalistic theology
- Dialogical prayer with the real Divine Presence in a personal encounter with God
- The role of the zaddik, the *shaliah tzibbur* and the power of community in channeling blessing and *shefa* (divine abundance);
- The importance of melody, (wordless) niggun, and silence.
- Imagination, guided imagery and meditation.

**Hebrew Texts:**


- The Maggid of Mezeritch: Man and God as two parts of one whole. *Likkutei Amarim (Maggid Devarav le-Ya’akov)* #33, s.v. *Asey Lekhah Shtei Hatzotzrot Kesef*; #66: The return to the divine Nothing (*ayin*); petitionary prayer and praying for the Shekhinah.

- R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, *Kedushat Levi*. Standing before God as God stands before us. The four worlds of prayer. *Parashat Be-Shalah*, s.v. *Va-Yavo Noah*. The zaddik resists the decree of the floodwaters until the very last moment, praying for divine compassion to triumph, until he is forced into the Ark by the waters. [The breath of life and renewal.]

- Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. *Shema* as the “Upper Unity” and *Barukh Shem Kevod* as the “Lower Unity.”

- Rabbi Israel Hapstein of Kozienice. *Avodat Yisrael*. Parashat Noah, s.v. *Va-Yavo Noah*. The zaddik resists the decree of the floodwaters until the very last moment, praying for divine compassion to triumph, until he is forced into the Ark by the waters. [How to create communal prayer.]

- Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. *Likkutei Eitzot s.v. Tefillah* #58: prayer and gathering flowers into a bouquet; personalization and dramatization of the letters—a romantic dance with speaking parts. *Sihot ha-Ran* #52: Illuminated prayer as “God.” [Hitbodedut]

— *Sefat Emet Parashat Ki Tavo 5632 [1872, s.v. ba-midrash Im Shamo’a Tishma]—* Listening ever more deeply—the unending opening of inner doors; *Sefat Emet* — *Parashat Ki Tavo 5634 [1874] s.v. be-midrash Tanhuma Ki Moshe Rebeinu Ra’ah...* Prayer as first fruit of the day, rooting the first moment in its divine origin

• Rabbi Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, *Mei ha-Shiloah.* The holiness of prayers that are not answered. Parashat Va-ethanan, Beit Ya’akov ha-Kelali (s.v., Hashem,...; daf nun-bet amud gimel, p. 104): God’s synagogue at the end of days (Isaiah 56:7) is formed of the prayers which Israel prays without being answered. And cf. ibid. *Parashat Tzav, s.v. ve-lavash ha-kohen:* The ashes on the altar represent the parts of the human personality which are not yet ready for resolution (beirur); they become the body of the altar, the motivating force in one’s being for crying to God, the aspects which have not been accepted. And cf. *Tiferet Yosef, Parashat Noah*—“dead ends” of life—> a fire in the bones and deep feeling of unfulfilled yearning and disappointment from which the resurrection comes....

• Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczna. *Derekh ha-Melekh Shemini Atzeret* (c. 1930), pp. 266-268. Meeting God at prayer; discovering what we really want.

Prayer together with the sun and moon: *Tzav ve-Ziruz s.v. Im lo ta’amta* (p. 13, # 18); *Derekh ha-Melekh Parasaht Noah Hashkatah:* Quieting the mind.


**Week #13. Contemporary approaches.**

**Additional Readings**

**General**


**Biblical Worship and Prayer**


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**Second Temple Judaism and Qumran**


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**The Meaning of the Jerusalem Temple**


Levenson, Jon D. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*. pp. 89-186


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**Pilgrimage and the Jerusalem Temple**


**Rabbinic Judaism**
Kadushin, Max. *Worship and Ethics*.

**Theology and Piyyut**
Folk Beliefs, Customs and Prayers

**Kabbalah and Hasidism**
_____. “Prayer as Text and Prayer as Mystical Experience.” In Dan, *Jewish Mysticism II:*


_____. "Hitbodedut as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah", in Green, ed., Jewish Spirituality I, pp. 405-438.


The Modern Period


David Hartman, A Living Covenant ---Soloveitchik on prayer


Soloveitchik, Joseph B. “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah.” Tradition 17:2 (1978),

Contemporary Approaches

Yitzhak Buxbaum, Jewish Spiritual Practices

_____. Real Davvening: Jewish Prayer As a Spiritual Practice and a Form of Meditation for Beginning and Experienced Davveners (The Jewish Spirit Booklet Series)

Shefa Gold, The Magic of Hebrew Chant: Healing the Spirit, Transforming the Mind, Deepening Love with a Foreword by Sylvia Boorstein (Jewish Lights)


Mike Comins, (ed.) *Making Prayer Real: Leading Jewish Spiritual Voices on Why Prayer is Difficult and What to Do about It,* (Jewish Lights, 2010).


Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (Yale University Press)
