**The History of the Amidah: The Mishnah**

The Amidah is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. Indeed, communal, organized and fixed (set words) prayer is not mentioned in the Bible. The only prayer we hear about in the Bible is spontaneous prayer, said whenever a person felt the need to pray, for instance during a battle or when someone is sick.

The first Jewish sources that talk about fixed prayer are rabbinic sources composed between the years 135 C.E. and 500 C.E. Some of these sources seem to imply that regular fixed prayer was established by Rabban Gamaliel, a rabbinic leader who lived in the generation following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.

The first and most famous source is a Mishnah from tractate Berakhot. Below is my explanation of this mishnah and some questions for you to think about:

**Mishnah Berakhot 4:3**

Rabban Gamaliel says: every day a person should pray the eighteen [blessings].

Rabbi Joshua says: an abstract of the eighteen.

Rabbi Akiva says: if he knows it fluently he prays the eighteen, and if not an abstract of the eighteen.

Rabbi Eliezer says: if a person makes his prayers fixed, it is not [true] supplication.

***Explanation***

Rabban Gamaliel demands that every person recite these eighteen blessings (the Amidah, which now has 19 blessings). Note that this would not have been easy in a time when people did not have siddurim (prayerbooks). The first siddurim were not composed until around the 8th century and until the printing press (15th century) most people would not have had one. Nevertheless, Rabban Gamaliel mandates that every person recite the entire Amidah three times a day, every day.

Rabbi Joshua says that a person need not recite the full eighteen but rather may recite an abbreviated form. It seems that he thinks that the full eighteen is just too long.

Rabbi Akiva tries to compromise between the two previous opinions. If he is capable of reciting the full Amidah, then he should do so. If, however, he is not capable because he is not familiar enough with it, then he may recite the shorter version.

Rabbi Eliezer objects to the entire institution of set prayer, prayers with wording that must be recited every day. One who is given a fixed set of prayers is not really asking God for anything. The only reason he is saying the prayer is that he is obligated to do so. Prayer should be from the heart, and not the recitation of a set formula.

**Questions for Thought:**

* What are the benefits and detriments of all of these positions? Whose opinion do we follow? Why do you think that this opinion "won out" in the end?
* With whom do you most agree? Why?
* Try to think about the issue from the perspective of one of the rabbis with whom you disagree. Why did he say what he said? What is beneficial about his way of thinking of the issue?
* If you didn't have fixed prayer, meaning prayers you were supposed to say every day, how often would you pray? Do you ever pray when you are not at "teffilot"?