

The History of the Amidah: The Rambam

The following text is from the introduction of the Rambam (Maimonides) to the laws of tefillah. The point of reading this text is not just to get you to think about the history of Jewish prayer, but to get you to think about why Jewish prayer is the way it is today. What did the Rambam, who wrote this text, think about the purpose of prayer? To help you on your way we have put together the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. They are meant to get you thinking. There are also questions at the end and in the footnotes to help you think.

- What is "prayer"? What do we mean when we use that word?
- Why should people pray? Are our prayers for God or for us?
- Why should we have set formulas for prayer? Why not just pray spontaneously whenever we want to?
- How did prayer change from the time the Torah was given until the time when the Amidah was created (around second century C.E.)?
- What exactly is the Amidah? What types of things do we say in the Amidah?

Halakhah One

It is a positive commandment (מצוה) to pray (להתפלל) every day, as it says: "And you shall worship Adonai your God" (Shemot 23:25). Tradition teaches that this *Avodah* (worship) is Tefillah, as it says "...and to worship Him with all of your hearts..." (Devarim 10:12). The Rabbis said: What sort of *Avodah* is there with the heart? - Tefillah.¹

Halakhah Two

The number of [daily] Tefillot is not mandated by the Torah, nor is the liturgy of Tefillah mandated by the Torah, nor does Tefillah have a set time from the Torah...

The commandment of the Torah is for a person to plead before God and to pray every day, saying the praise of the *Kadosh Barukh Hu* (the Holy One, Who is Blessed). Afterwards, he can ask for his needs by requesting and pleading. And then he gives praise and thanks to God for the good which He has granted him.² Everyone prays according to his own ability.

Halakhah Three

If he was one who regularly prayed, he would increase his supplications and requests and if it was hard for him to find the words he could speak according to his ability - at any time he wanted.³

Similarly, the number of Tefillot was according to his ability: Some would say Tefillah once a day and some people would say Tefillah many times [a

¹ Avodah—worship—usually means worship at the Temple which was done through sacrifice. But according to the rabbis there is an avodah done in one's heart—prayer.

² Note that this is a summary of the contents of the Amidah. The beginning is praise of God, the middle parts are requests and the last part returns to praise and thanksgiving.

³ This is an explanation of the last line of halakhah 2—"everyone prays according to his own ability."

day]. Everyone would say Tefillah facing the Bet Hamikdash - wherever it might be.

This is how the matter was from the times of Moshe Rabbenu until Ezra⁴.

Halakhah Four

Once the Jews were exiled in the times of the evil Nebuchadnezzar⁵, they assimilated in Persia and Greece and other nations, had children in those countries and those children spoke confusing languages, each one was a mixture of several languages. Due to this, people couldn't express themselves fully in one language, rather it would be a mish-mash of language, as it says: "**And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples**" (Nehemiah 13:24); and when one of them would pray, he would find it difficult to request or praise **the Kadosh Barukh Hu** (the Holy One, Who is Blessed) in **Lashon haKodesh** (the holy language, Hebrew) without other languages mixing in.

Once Ezra (c. 450 BCE) and his court saw this, they established 18 berakhot in order:

The first three praising Hashem;

The last three thanking Hashem;

And the middle berakhot which contain requests for all sorts of the things.

These are general categories for all people's wishes and for the needs of the community.

This was done so that they [the berakhot] would be set in everyone's mouth and they could learn them easily and quickly.

And the Tefillah of those who had trouble speaking would be as complete a Tefillah as the Tefillah of those who speak easily. Because of this matter, they established all of the Berakhot and Tefillot in the mouths of all of Yisraeel so that the theme of each berakhah would be set even in the mouth of one who has trouble speaking.

Concluding things to think about:

The Rambam claims that there are two levels of tefillah. The Torah commands everyone to worship according to his/her own ability, whenever they want, for as long as they want. It just has to be done every day. The rabbis saw that this was hard for people, so they established fixed prayers for the Jewish people.

- Why do you think the rabbis made such a big change in how Jews should pray?
- What were the advantages to the earlier system?
- Why should we pray in Hebrew?
- How do you feel about having a commandment to pray? Does this make it easier or harder for you?
- What would Judaism be like without regular mandatory prayer?

⁴ The leader of the Jews who returned to the land of Israel after the Babylonian exile which followed the destruction of the first Temple.

⁵ The Babylonian king who destroyed the first Temple, 586 B.C.E.