
Jewish prayer can be tricky. A lot of the service is in Hebrew, and even with a translation, it's often hard to know exactly what a prayer is trying to say - what the *point* of the prayer is.

A first step towards understanding the service can be understanding the structure - the flow of the prayers, and the different parts of the service. This pamphlet is meant as a brief overview of that - we hope it's helpful!

The page numbers you see refer to our *siddur* (prayerbook),
Mishkan Tefillah

One who rises from prayer a better person than they were -- their prayer has been answered

AN
INTRODUCTION
TO JEWISH
PRAYER



THE PARTS OF
THE EVENING
SERVICE

Part 1 - The Warmup (p 2-27)

The Rabbis of old taught that before a person tries to pray, her or she should first pray. That was a way of saying that it's hard to jump into prayer - it often takes some warmup. So, every service starts with some prayers that are meant to create a prayerful mood, and to help us separate from the outside world, for a bit.

Think of this is a kind of spiritual calisthenics - repetitive motion, aimed at getting your muscles warmed up and loosened.

On Friday nights, much of this warmup takes the special form of *Kabbalat Shabbat* - Welcoming Shabbat. It's a series of Psalms and other readings which were assembled by the *Kabbalists* (Mystics) over 400 years ago. It pictures Shabbat as a bride, and we are the groom, anxiously awaiting her arrival.

Part 2 - The *Sh'ma* and its Blessings (p 28-45)

The *Barechu* (p 28) is the Call to Worship - it announces that the warmup is over, and it's time to officially start praying. It's followed by a series of 4 prayers which surround one central prayer - the *Sh'ma*.

1) Creation (p 30) - We praise God as the One responsible for all of creation. It's intended to help us feel a sense of awe and humility in the presence of such grandeur.

2) Revelation (p 32) - We thank God for giving us the Torah, and for teaching us how to live as Jews. It's a reminder that our tradition is a gift from God.

3) *Sh'ma* (p 34-37) - often called "*Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta*," these are actually one prayer, focussing on God's oneness, and our need to acknowledge it.

4) Redemption (p 38-41) - We remember the times God saved our people, and look forward to a time when we will live in a perfected world.

5) Safety (p 42) - We thank God for looking out for in a world which can often be frightful.

Part 3 - The Tefillah (p 46-63)

If the *Sh'ma* and its Blessings are a chance for us to talk *about* God, then the *Tefillah* (also called the *Amidah* or the *Sh'moneh Esrei*) is a chance to speak *with* God.

1) Praise (p 48-53) - the *Tefillah* begins with three blessings of praise. First, we praise God for taking care of our ancestors (p 48), then for being so mighty (p 50), then for being so holy (p 52). Together, these are meant to remind us of "before Whom we stand."

2) Shabbat (p 54) - during the week, we would now continue with 12 blessings of request, wherein we ask God for certain things. But, it would be inappropriate to do that on Shabbat - even God

needs a day off! So, instead, we simply speak here about how wonderful and holy Shabbat is.

3) Thanks (p 56-61) - we conclude by thanking God. We thank God for listening to our prayers (p 56), for everything which God has already done for us (p 58) and for peace (p 60). Even if our prayers aren't answered, in the simplest sense, we still want to remind ourselves how much we have to be thankful for.

4) Postscript (p 62) - We end the *Tefillah* with a last, somewhat less formal blessing. We ask God to help us be the best people we can be - kind with our words and working only for holy purposes.

Part 4 - Conclusion (p 282-294)

The *Sh'ma* and its Blessings and the *Tefillah* are the main parts of the service. Once they are done, the service is wrapped up fairly quickly.

1) *Aleinu* (p 282) - We remind ourselves of our major obligations - to praise God, and to spread God's message. And, most importantly, to work for *Tikkun Olam*, the repair and perfection of our world.

2) Mourner's *Kaddish* (p 294) - The content of this prayer is actually simple, repetitive praise of God, but it's said in honor of those who have died, especially recently, or at this time in years past.