

Small Group Study and Discussion:  
Maimonides on “What is Prayer and How Did We Get Here?”

Instructions for Small Group Text Study & Discussion

1. Introduce yourselves to each other!
2. Sit together in silence for a minute so each person can breathe, settle and find her/his center.
3. Invite those who would like to offer a blessing for studying Torah to do so.
4. Take turns reading the text slowly, paragraph by paragraph, in English and/or Hebrew. If a paragraph of text is read in Hebrew, make sure that it is read aloud immediately afterwards in English. Just read the whole text though first without discussing it.
5. After you have read the text through, spend five minutes just asking your questions about the text and what it is saying, without anyone needing to answer! It can be so liberating just to ask the many questions that the text raises for us, without needing to come up with answers! After about five minutes of sharing your questions, feel free to share your initial responses.
6. Finally, turn to the "Questions for Reflection & Discussion" section and discuss the questions together, one by one. We hope that you will share honestly from your own experience and that you will be deeply curious and interested when others speak so you might learn from their experience.
7. When the bell rings to regather with the whole group, allow whoever is speaking to finish their thought and then sit together for another minute of silence as a way to come to grateful closure for the learning you will have shared.

### **רמב"ם יד החזקה - הלכות תפלה ונשיאת כפים פרק א**

מצות עשה להתפלל בכל יום שנאמר "ועבדתם את ה' אלהיכם" (שמות כג: כה): מפי השמועה למדו שעבודה זו היא תפלה שנאמר "ולעבדו בכל לבבכם" (דברים יא: יג). אמרו חכמים אי זו היא עבודה שבלב זו תפלה. ואין מנין התפלות מן התורה, ואין משנה התפלה הזאת מן התורה. ואין לתפלה זמן קבוע מן התורה:

It is a positive commandment to pray every day as Scripture says "You shall serve *YHWH* your God" (Ex. 23:25). Through the tradition we learn that this service is prayer, as Scripture says "and to serve God with all your heart" (Deut. 11:13), and the Sages taught: what is the service of the heart? Prayer. The Torah does not number the prayers, nor is our form of prayer from the Torah, nor is there a set time for prayer from the Torah.

ולפיכך נשים ועבדים חייבין בתפלה, לפי שהיא מצות עשה שלא הזמן גרמא. אלא חיוב מצוה זו כך הוא שיהא אדם מתחנן ומתפלל בכל יום, ומגיד שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואחר כך שואל צרכיו שהוא צריך להם בבקשה ובתחנה, ואחר כך נותן שבח והודיה לה' על הטובה שהשפיע לו כל אחד לפי כחו:

Therefore, women and slaves are obligated to pray, as this is a positive commandment which has no specified time. But, the obligation of this commandment is that we are to supplicate and pray each day, to express the praises of the blessed Holy One, and then to ask regarding our needs, with petitions and supplications. Then we are to give praise and thanks to God for the good that God provides to us, each according to our ability.

אם היה רגיל מרבה בתחנה ובקשה, ואם היה ערל שפתים מדבר כפי יכולתו ובכל עת שירצה. וכן מנין התפלות, כל אחד כפי יכולתו: יש מתפלל פעם אחת ביום, ויש מתפלל פעמים הרבה. והכל יהיו מתפללין נכח המקדש בכל מקום שיהיה. וכן היה הדבר תמיד ממשה רבינו ועד עזרא:

If one is familiar with this process one would expand the supplications and petitions; if one's speech is faltering one speaks according to one's ability, whenever one wishes. This applies to the number of the prayers, each one offers according to one's ability: there are those who will pray once a day, and those who will pray many times. Everyone prays in the direction of the Temple, no matter where one is. This was the practice from the time of Moses to that of Ezra.

כיון שגלו ישראל בימי נבוכדנצר הרשע, נתערבו בפרס ויון ושאר האומות, ונולדו להם בנים בארצות הגוים. ואותן הבנים נתבלבלו שפתם, והיתה שפת כל אחד ואחד מעורבת מלשונות הרבה. וכיון שהיה מדבר אינו יכול לדבר כל צורכו בלשון אחת, אלא בשיבוש שנאמר "ובניהם חצי מדבר אשדודית וגו' ואינם מכירים לדבר יהודית וכלשון עם ועם" (נחמיה יג: כד).

But, when the people were exiled in the time of Nebuhadnezzar (586 BCE, after the destruction of the first Temple), the people assimilated among the Persians, the Greeks

and the other nations. Their children were born in foreign lands, and those children's speech became confused. Each one's tongue was mixed up of many languages. When they spoke they could not express all that they needed or wished in one language, but in a flawed manner, as Scripture says "a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean" (Neh. 13:24).

ומפני זה, כשהיה אחד מהן מתפלל, תקצר לשונו לשאול חפציו או להגיד שבח הקדוש ברוך הוא בלשון הקדש, עד שיערבו עמה לשונות אחרות.

Thus, when any one of them would pray, they were unable to ask for all that they needed or to express the praise of the blessed Holy One in holy language (*leshon hakodesh*) without also turning to some other language.

וכיון שראה עזרא ובית דינו כך, עמדו ותקנו להם שמנה עשרה ברכות על הסדר: שלש ראשונות שבח לה'; ושלוש אחרונות הודיה; ואמצעיות יש בהן שאלת כל הדברים, שהן כמו אבות לכל חפצי איש ואיש, ולצרכי הציבור. כולן כדי שיהיו ערוכות בפי הכל, וילמדו אותן במהרה, ותהיה תפלת אלו העלגים תפלה שלימה, כתפלת בעלי הלשון הצחה. ומפני ענין זה תקנו כל הברכות והתפלות מסודרות בפי כל ישראל, כדי שיהא ענין כל ברכה ערוך בפי העלג:

When Ezra and his associates saw this, they established eighteen fixed blessings: three at the beginning, praising God; three at the end offering thanks; and the middle blessings asking for a variety of things. These blessings are paradigmatic of the needs of every person, and the needs of the community. They established them all so that they could become familiar and easily expressed by every person; so that they could be learned quickly; so that the prayer of those who stuttered could be complete, like that of those whose prayer is expressed purely. In this manner they established all of these blessings and prayers in the mouths of all Israel, so that the theme of each blessing would be settled in the mouth even of the stutterer.

Discussion Questions:

According to the Rambam:

What is prayer?

Here “to serve God with all your heart” is understood to be “prayer”. Do you feel that your prayer expresses or encompasses the totality your service to God with all your heart? How narrowly or expansively do you tend to think about what prayer is?

What is liturgical prayer for?

To what problem does the establishment of liturgical prayer respond? In your experience, what problem, if any, has the establishment of liturgical prayer create?

The elements of prayer?

What are the three fundamental elements of prayer identified by the Rambam?

Are these three important to you? Why or why not? Which of these three is easiest for you to address personally? Which is the hardest?