

Petitionary Prayer on Shabbat: Revisiting the Issue

By Joseph G. Rosenstein

When you write a Siddur, you are forced to revisit all of the issues that are embedded in the traditional prayers. I recently completed Siddur Eit Ratzon (www.newsiddur.org), a prayerbook for the morning services of Shabbat and festivals. In this article, I will describe how the issue of petitionary prayer arose when I was writing this siddur, the dilemma that it raised for me, and how I resolved it. I present for your consideration the dilemma that it raises for all of us.

Siddur Eit Ratzon is a traditional prayerbook intended for those who are seeking more meaning and spirituality than they have found in the traditional prayerbook. One important feature of Siddur Eit Ratzon is that it presents the Shabbat morning service as a spiritual journey and encourages the person who is davenning to take that journey during the service. This is not a new idea, but perhaps has not been previously implemented in a prayerbook.

The stages in this spiritual journey are dramatically structured to prepare us for the personal audience with God that we call the Amidah. In the first three stages of the journey, as described in Siddur Eit Ratzon, we position *ourselves* appropriately for the Amidah, and in the next three stages, we position *God* (that is, our understanding of God) appropriately for the Amidah. Our position is one of gratitude for our many blessings; God's position, that is, our understanding of God, is that belief in God can indeed make a difference in our lives.

When we come to the Amidah, we have reached the moment for which we have been preparing, the moment for which we have been praying. We have arranged within our minds and within our hearts who we are, who God is, and how we relate to one another. We have established intellectually that God can make a difference in our lives, that God's blessings, guidance, and assistance are always available to us. And we have proclaimed, immediately before the Amidah, that God is ga-al Yisrael, redeemer of Israel, the one who makes a difference in our lives, collectively and individually.

We come before God in the Amidah, and we are given an opportunity to personalize that proclamation, to bring God into our own lives. But we find that this climax of the spiritual journey is missing in the Shabbat Amidah. The focus of the Shabbat Amidah is not our relationship with God, but Shabbat.

How do we bring God into our lives? The traditional device for doing this is the petitionary prayers. These prayers appear in each weekday Amidah, but are absent from the Shabbat Amidah. The rabbis evidently felt that it was inappropriate to petition God on the Shabbat and so the petitionary prayers are replaced in the Shabbat Amidah by a single prayer about Shabbat.

What a dilemma! How can I write a Siddur that prepares davenners for their audience with God and then, just when they're ready for that audience, tells them to come back tomorrow!

But this is not just my problem. This is a dilemma for our community.

Many Jews say the Amidah only on Shabbat and thus rarely, if ever, recite the petitionary prayers. That means that they (or we) do not have the opportunity to bring

God into their lives (or our lives) through the traditional prayers, that we are denied the traditional way of tapping into the strength of the One that is the source of all strength.

I suggest that it is time to acknowledge this reality and reinstate the opportunity for petitionary prayer in the Shabbat Amidah.

Knowing that the Rabbis frowned on such prayers didn't stop our ancestors from saying the "mi shebeirach" prayer for healing on Shabbat. They even inserted a disclaimer in the prayer, the words "Shabbat hi milizok," which can be loosely translated as "we know that we're not supposed to cry out to You on Shabbat, but we're going to do it anyways" So there is precedent in the tradition for my suggestion.

I should mention that my perspective on petitionary prayer is not traditional. I reject the "cosmic candy machine" view that if you insert the correct prayer in the slot, your request will be fulfilled, that if you pray wholeheartedly for victory, your team will win the football game. My perspective, as described in Siddur Eit Ratzon, is rather that "God's blessings, guidance, and assistance are always flowing to us, that no special effort on God's part is required to direct that flow to us. However, we must position ourselves to receive that flow – and that is to acknowledge our need for that blessing, to say "God, please help me!" When we ask for God's help, God's help is present! In that sense, petitionary prayer always works. Do we always get what we want? Clearly not. But through prayer, through speaking to God, we can find the spiritual resources to deal with life's problems."

From this perspective, we are not asking God to do anything that is inappropriate for the Shabbat, we are asking only that God be present as we pray, as God already is. This kind of "petitionary prayer", where we acknowledge our need for the help that God always provides, for God's assistance in moving ourselves into God's presence, to me sounds quite appropriate for Shabbat.

How did I solve my dilemma? I wrote a new prayer, in English and Hebrew, and placed it directly after the Shabbat blessing in the Amidah.

"Ribbono shel olam, Creator of the universe,
we acknowledge Your influence in our lives by bringing before You
our needs and our hopes, our concerns and our aspirations.
When we are perplexed, help us find clarity –
for You grace us with understanding.
When we feel guilty, help us find forgiveness –
for You forgive us abundantly.
When we have lost our way, help us find direction –
for You guide our steps.
When we feel far from You, help us feel nearer –
for You want us to return to You.
When we are broken, help us find healing –
for You heal those who are in distress.
When we feel desperate, help us find hope –
for You bless everyone of our years.
When we feel overwhelmed, help us find peace of mind –
for You restore serenity to our souls.
When we feel fearful, help us find courage –

for You raise up those who are bowed down.
When we are tired, help us find strength –
for You give strength to the weary.
You are the Source of clarity and forgiveness, of direction and return,
of healing and hope and serenity, of courage and strength.
When we stand in Your presence
we acknowledge and experience all these blessings.
We praise You for always being receptive to our prayers,
for compassionately listening to all of our prayers.”

Some of the nine central verses of this prayer echo the traditional petitionary prayers, and some reflect needs that are not addressed in the traditional prayers. The phrase “help us find ...” reflects the perspective on petitionary prayer described in the preceding paragraphs, and comes from the Yom Kippur liturgy (“hamtzei lanu m’chilah”). On Yom Kippur, the Shabbat par excellence, the Shabbat of all Shabbats, petitionary prayer is of course acceptable.

Those of us who have grown up in traditional religious settings may find it difficult to recite ourselves a prayer like this on Shabbat. But I think we should seriously consider that we can give an important spiritual gift to others if we provide them the opportunity to speak to God in this way on the one day they come to prayer services.