Of Prayer and Prayer-Books: Approaches to Jewish Liturgy
Rabbi Joshua Cahan

This course will examine the character and composition of the Jewish prayer ritual, and how it can both facilitate and hinder deep Prayer Experience. We will look at elements of the conceptual framework for Jewish prayer; its history and development; select prayer texts; and the experiential

Goals:

1. Making a distinction between Prayer as experience and Prayers as the script for our ritual prayer practice, so that we can examine the complex relationship between them.
2. Exploring the development of our liturgy to understand its structure and using a literary approach to uncover multiple layers of meaning & symbolism in each text.
3. Looking at how to frame and structure prayer spaces and experiences in a way that enables them to be impactful and carry personal meaning within a traditional framework.

I. Week 1: Introduction

A. Defining terms

We will begin by defining our terms, distinguishing Prayer from Liturgy, Liturgy from the Siddur, and begin to think look at how the intersection between these categories provides a starting point for thinking about what Tefilah is and what it could be.

B. Important resources

1. An overview of some of the basic reference books that will be important both to the course and to any rabbi teaching and shaping prayer communities.

C. Readings

1. Hammer ch. 1
2. Petuchowski ch 1

II. Week 2: Tanakh and Tefilah

We will look at the complex relationship between our prayer service and Tanakh. On the one hand, we will see how our concept of prayer largely departs from Biblical models; on the other, how no part of the Siddur can be understood without careful attention to its biblical roots.

Reading: Hammer, chapter 3
Blumenthal, “The Book Of Daniel: A Guide For Judaism In Exile”

III. Week 3: Keva & Kavana

The origins of Rabbinic prayer can be traced back to a basic split between a conception of Prayer based on the Biblical model and a practice meant to replicate key elements of

the Temple and sacrificial rituals. Its development is in many ways an ongoing process of seeking ways to bridge that divide.

Readings: Landes, *My People's Prayer Book* ch 2
Cahan, "Is Fixed Liturgy Consistent with Heartfelt Prayer?"

IV. Week 4: Amida

We will begin to explore the methods and power of a literary analysis of prayer texts in light of their biblical and rabbinic sources, focusing on the layers of meaning in the opening brachot of the Amida.

Hammer ch 6

V. Week 5: Birkat Hamazon

We will look at why Birkat hamazon is the only truly Torah-mandated prayer practice and use it to illustrate how some texts are deceptively simple while others are densely packed with meaning.

Hammer ch 13

VI. **Week 6: Shema**

We will consider how the Shema both presents the central mission of the religious personality and a set of guidelines for pursuing that mission; and how the blessings of the Shema position Torah study as the central expression of both God's love for us and our love of God.

Readings: Hammer ch. 8
Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service* ch 2

VII. **Week 7: Kaddish and calls to prayer**

It is impossible to talk about Jewish prayer without attention to the Kaddish. We will look at the core elements of the Kaddish text and how it became both the backbone of our prayer service and entwined with mourning rituals; and at the broader category of call and response moments that permeate our liturgy.

De Sola Pool *The Kaddish*, 8-31

VIII. **Week 8: Nusach and music**

We will look at how the music is key to turning prayer texts into prayer experiences, and how using them strategically allows us to shape experiences with intentionality and care.

IX. **Week 9: Cultivating Prayerfulness in the midst of Prayers**

Finally, we will think about the experience of Prayer and of seeking connection with God,

and how we can use the traditional liturgy to facilitate deep, individual prayer experience in the midst of a communal practice. We will begin to think about the types of prayer goals we might set for ourselves and our communities.

“Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Tefillah Education in the 21st Century”