One famous mystic taught that just as important as the black letters on the page are the white spaces that surround them. In this class, we’ll explore the meaning and depth behind Jewish spiritual language, as well as the sometimes confusing choreography and customs of the synagogue.
Prayer Mode #1: KEVA

There is a story, told by Rabbi Israel Friedman, about a small Jewish town. It was far off from the main roads of the land, but it had all the necessary municipal institutions: a mikvah, a cemetery, a hospital, and a law court, as well as all sorts of craftsmen: tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, and masons. One trade, however, was lacking: There was no watchmaker.

Over the course of years, many of the clocks became so annoyingly inaccurate that their owners just decided to let them run down and ignore them altogether.

There were others, however, who maintained that as long as the clocks ran, they should not be abandoned. So they wound their clocks day after day, though they knew that they were not accurate.

One day the news spread through the town that a watchmaker had arrived, and everyone rushed to him with their clocks. But the only ones he could repair were those that had been kept running. The abandoned clocks had grown too rusty!

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel  
*Man’s Quest for God* (1954)
From this text, what words would you use to describe *keva* prayer?

What is the value of *keva* prayer? What are the challenges?

How do you personally relate to the concept of *keva* prayer?
Prayer Mode #2: KAVANNA

There was a young shepherd who was unable to recite the Hebrew prayers. The only way in which he worshiped was: “Master of the world! You well know that if You had sheep and gave them to me to tend, though I take wages for tending from all others, from You I would take nothing, because I love You.”

One day, a learned man passing by heard the shepherd pronounce his offer and shouted at him:

“Fool, do not pray that way!” So the shepherd asked him: “How then should I pray?” So the learned man taught him all of the blessings in order, the recitation of the Sh’ma and the Amidah, so that from that point forward the shepherd would not pray the way that he used to.

But after the learned man left, the shepherd forgot all that he had been taught, and could not pray. And he was even afraid to say what he had been accustomed to saying, because the learned man had told him not to. One night, the learned man had a dream, and in it he heard a voice: “If you do not tell the shepherd to say what he was accustomed to saying before you came to him, know that misfortune will overtake you, for you have robbed Me of one of My most precious blessings.”

At once the learned man went to the shepherd and said to him: “What prayer are you now making?” The shepherd answered: “None, for I have forgotten what you taught me, and you forbade me to say ‘If you had sheep...’”

Then the learned man told him what he had dreamed, and said: “Please, say what you used to say.” Behold, here is a person who had neither great learning nor eloquent words; he only had it in his heart to do good, and this was esteemed in heaven. “The Compassionate One desires the Heart” (Sanhedrin 106a).

Rabbi Yehudah he-Hasid
(12th century, Germany)
From this text, what words would you use to describe *kavanna* prayer?

What is the value of *kavanna* prayer? What are the challenges?

How do you personally relate to the concept of *kavanna* prayer?
Keva: The Structure of Prayer

THE BASIC SERVICE

WARM-UP
Blessings and psalms that help us enter into prayer

SH'MA & BLESSINGS
Barkhu
Call to prayer
Maariv Aravim/Yotzer Or
Creation
Ahavat Olam/Ahavah Raba
Revelation

SH'MA
The Jewish declaration of faith

Mi Chamocha
Redemption

Hashkeveinu (evening)
Peace

AMIDAH
Our standing audience with God

TORAH READING
(Shabbat, Monday, and Thursday mornings)

CONCLUSION
Aleinu
The closing prayer of gratitude for being Jewish
Kaddish
The prayer recited in memory of the deceased

TIMES FOR PRAYER

MA'ARIV
Evening

SHACHARIT
Morning

MINCHA
Afternoon

JUST ON SHABBAT

KABBALAT SHABBAT
Before Ma'ariv on Shabbat evening

MUSAF
After Shacharit on Shabbat and holiday mornings.

HAVDALAH
The closing service for Shabbat
Synagogue Geography

**SIDDUR**
The prayerbook

**KIPPAH/YAMULKE**
The head covering

**TALLIT & TZITZIT**
The prayer shawl and tied fringes, symbolic of the 613 mitzvot

**TEFILIN**
The leather boxes and straps (worn only on weekdays), containing the words of the Sh’ma

**MINYAN**
Quorum of ten adult Jews needed to pray

**DAVEN**
To pray (verb, Yiddish)

**ALIYAH**
The honor of going up to the Torah to bless a portion of the reading

**HAGBA & G’LILA**
The honor of lifting (hagba) or dressing (g’lila) the Torah scroll
Kavanna: Talking to God
Rabbi Naomi Levy

What are we to do when the prayer book does not contain the words we are searching for? What do we do when certain feelings well up inside us, but the words to express them are absent from our liturgies?

I first started writing my own prayers when I was pregnant with my son. Pregnancy is a miraculous experience, and there was so much I wanted to say to God. I wanted to give thanks; I wanted to tell God about my worries, my hopes, my awful morning sickness. I wanted to pray for the health of my child.

So I found myself talking to God each day, and soon I was writing down new prayer after prayer. And I have never stopped. The process of writing these prayers became a source of enormous joy and comfort. It helped calm my fears as I approached labor and delivery. I could talk to God in plain English, without any pretense. I could enter into an intimate relationship with God.

Some people are shocked when I encourage them to supplement their traditional prayers with personal, spontaneous ones. They assume that making any change to the prayer service is forbidden. But they are mistaken. Composing personal prayers is not a sin, it’s a blessing. It is a way to restore our communication with God. Where do you think all the prayers in the prayer book came from? They weren’t written in heaven. They were created by human beings who were filled with awe and who wanted to share their thoughts and feelings with God. Religious expression is not some relic from the past. We should never hesitate to give voice to our souls.

“Pray for me, Rabbi” is probably the most common request I hear from those who come to see me. My response is always, “Of course I will, but I need your help.”

And I encourage the person seated before me to tell me what he or she wants me to say to God. Inevitably, the most heartfelt and beautiful words of prayer issue forth from the very mouth that had previously been unable to pray. Stunned and proud, the individual returns to the world blessed with the gift of personal prayer.

It is remarkable to see what can emerge from us when we stop trying to pray to God and start talking to God instead. Too often, we envision prayer as something saintly and proper. Something that has strict rules and standards. We get intimidated and inhibited. But talking to God is a very natural and intimate experience. We can talk to God anywhere: in the shower, in the car, at work, in bed. We don’t need to sound smart or polished. We don’t need to ask anyone else to do it for us.

Letters to God
Rabbi Elie Spitz

This innovative exercise in kavanna comes from Rabbi Elie Spitz, rabbi of Congregation B’nai Israel in Tustin, CA and a noted teacher of Jewish spirituality and meditation. It is based on the practice, dating back to the 18th century, of placing a kvittel, or “little note,” in between the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Write a letter to God.
Use this space, or another paper if you want to keep it very private. Don’t worry about what you believe or don’t believe — you can address it to God, the Universe, or To Whom it May Concern.

Answer your letter as if it were God writing back to you.
Again, don’t judge what you write; rather, let your words flow spontaneously. Allow yourself to be surprised.
Brakhot
(Blessings)

The practice of saying brakhot is a way of joining together keva and kavanna — a ritual response that is spontaneously offered in a moment of true gratitude for a tasty meal, a beautiful sight, a piece of good news, or for reaching a time of celebration.

All brakhot begin with the same six-word formula:

BARUKH ATA ADONAI, ELOHEINU MELEKH HA-OLAM

Blessed [are] You Adonai Our God Ruler [of] the Universe

Brakhot that precede performing a mitzvah (lighting Shabbat candles, sitting in a sukkah, affixing a mezuzah, etc) continue on with the following four words:

ASHER KIDSHANU B’MITZVOTAV V’TZIVANU

Who makes us holy through Your mitzvot commanding us [to]
Upon doing something for the first time or celebrating a milestone:

_Barakh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, she-he-hiyanu v’hiyamnu, v’hiqiyana la-zman ha-zeh_

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us alive, and sustained us, and allowed us to reach this joyful moment.

Upon seeing the wonders of nature, such as a sunrise, lightning, shooting star, or beautiful vista:

_Barakh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, osch ma’aseh v’rei shit_

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who continues the work of creation.

Upon seeing a rainbow:

_Barakh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam zohber ha-brit ve’ne’eman bivrito v’hayam bema’amaro._

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who remembers the covenant and Your promises.

Upon hearing good news:

_Barakh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam hatov v’hamaytev._

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who is good and does goodness.

Upon hearing bad news, including of a death:

_Barakh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam dayan ha-emet_

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who judges truth.

Upon affixing a mezuzah to a doorpost:

_Barakh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam asher kidshetu b’mitzvotav v’zivanu la’ish o’amuzah._

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who makes us holy through Your mitzvot, commanding us to affix a mezuzah.

Before engaging in the study of Torah:

_Barakh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam asher kidshetu b’mitzvotav v’zivanu la’asok b’divrei Torah._

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who makes us holy through Your mitzvot, commanding us to busy ourselves in the study of Torah.
When You Lie Down, and When You Rise Up

Beginning and ending our day with the briefest moment of pause and gratitude transforms the rest of the day. Below are the first words we utter in the morning, and the last before we go to sleep.

**Modeh Ani**

**Men say:**

*Modeh ani lefanekha, melekha chay v’kiyam,*

*she’he’hezarta bi nishmati b’hemla raba emunatekha.*

**Women say:**

*Modah ani lefanekha, melekha chay v’kiyam,*

*she’he’hezarta bi nishmati b’hemla raba emunatekha.*

I am grateful before you, Eternal One,

for restoring my soul to me. Great is your faithfulness.

**Bedtime Sh’ma**

*Sh’ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*

Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

*B’yado afeid ruchi, b’eit ishan v’ah’ira*

*V’im ruchi g’viati, Adonai li v’lo ira.*

I place my spirit in your care, Adonai, when I wake and when I sleep. God is with me, I have no fear.
Pray: 10 Ways to Build a Spiritual Practice

- **Acknowledge moments of gratitude**
  Count your blessings. Pause and appreciate. Breathe. You are blessed.

- **Explore synagogues in your area**
  If you don’t yet have a spiritual home, go visit several different congregations and see where you feel most comfortable. Sometimes it takes a few tries, but when it clicks, it can change your life.

- **Recite the Bedtime Sh’mah**
  Saying our six-word declaration of faith before closing your eyes for the night means that every day ends on a good note, no matter what craziness came before.

- **Recite a blessing before each meal**
  Almost one billion people on Earth don’t know for certain where their next meal will come from. If you are one of the lucky ones who has access to food, pause and express gratitude.

- **Recite Modeh Ani upon waking up**
  Modeh ani lefanekha, melekh chai v’k’vyan, sh’ke’hezarta bi nishmati b’hemla rasha emuna tekh. This prayer thanks God for restoring our soul to us as we wake up. It is a phenomenal way to start the day positively.

- **Attend Friday evening services**
  From musical services with full bands to small minyanim relying on the power of the voice, there is really a Friday evening service for everybody. Find your niche and make it part of your weekly ritual.

- **Start wearing a kippah during prayer, study, and eating**
  Physically differentiate the sanctity of these moments by wearing a head covering. Kippot are traditional, but there is no reason why you can’t rock a fedora while studying a piece of Talmud.

- **Learn and begin to use the Shehehiyanu blessing for new things**
  For the first cherries of the summer, the first time you wear great new shoes, or upon reaching a special birthday — this is the all-purpose blessing for new things: Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, she’he’kiyanu v’kiyamanu v’kiyatanu laz’man ha-ze.

- **Attend Shabbat morning services**
  Sing together. Listen to your Rabbi’s inspiring words. Schmooze with your community. Share a meal with friends.

- **Begin putting on tallit and tefillin each morning**
  Get all wrapped up in your Judaism. Encircling yourself in a tallit and binding tefillin onto your arm and forehead are physical ways of feeling close to God.

- **Take 15 minutes to say mincha in the afternoon**
  Pausing for afternoon prayer is a great way to overcome the two o’clock slump. Think about what your morning has held, and what your evening could become.
Reflection on Chapter 6

Some of the things that are challenging for me about Jewish prayer:

Some of the things that I appreciate about Jewish prayer:

The role that prayer plays in my life:
Additional Readings

Books

The best way to familiarize yourself with the Jewish liturgy is to purchase a copy of the siddur that your synagogue uses and spend time reading it, marking it up, and making it yours. Some of the more common siddurim are:

- **Siddur Sim Shalom** (Conservative)
- **Mishkan Tefilah** (Reform)
- **Kol ha-Neshama** (Reconstructionist)
- **The Complete Artscroll Siddur** (Orthodox)

- **Reuven Hammer, Entering Jewish Prayer**
  A detailed, thorough overview of the evolution and history of the Jewish prayer service. A volume you will continually revisit as your knowledge and experience of the prayer service grows.

- **Haim Donin, To Pray as a Jew**
  An extremely useful (Orthodox) guide for anyone praying in a traditional setting. Best read together with your own copy of the siddur.

- **Abraham Joshua Heschel, Man’s Quest for God**
  In his poetic and inspiring style, Heschel addresses the question of what it really means to pray.

- **Michael Comins, Making Prayer Real**
  A collection of thoughtful reflections on prayer by a wide variety of rabbis and teachers.

Websites

- **Siddur Audio** ([sidduraudio.com](http://sidduraudio.com))
  Learn Jewish prayers at your own pace with this great collection of recordings, which closely follows the Conservative Movement’s prayer book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*.

- **Virtual Cantor** ([virtualcantor.com](http://virtualcantor.com))
  An even more comprehensive and detailed collection of Jewish prayer recordings. For those ready to take the next step in learning Jewish liturgy.