

The B'rachah -- Building Block of Worship

The basic building block of all Jewish prayer is the b'rachah. This liturgical formula is the source for all of the poetry and expansion which took place over the centuries in the Siddur. Understanding the formula of the B'rachah, how it works, what it intends, and how it is structured will give you a deep and important understanding of all of Jewish prayer in general. Let us now analyze the nature of b'rachot and see how they function and what they contain. We shall begin with an analysis of each word of the standard, basic b'rachah formula, *Baruch attah adonai elohaynu melech ha'olam...*

BARUCH בָּרַךְ

Most of us are familiar with this word and the most common English translation of it, namely "blessed" ("are You, O Lord, our God..."). But, when we look at the meaning of the English word "blessed," a problem arises. In English, to bless implies a hierarchical relationship between the one doing the blessing and the one who is blessed. Therefore, we raise the question, "Who are we to bless God?" The common translation "blessed" doesn't seem to be particularly appropriate for this Hebrew word.

It is usually suggested that the word baruch, comes from a root used in the Hebrew word בָּרַךְ knee, and that baruch has something to do with bowing or bending the knee. That, however, is a very uncertain theory; baruch may simply come from a word in another ancient language which also means "to praise" or "to bless." The word baruch is a complicated passive Hebrew word which, in this usage, implies a relationship with God. To define the relationships between a person, or people, and God is an extremely difficult thing to do. It implies that God is He who is deserving of our praise, awe, worship, serving, and looking towards. Have you ever tried to define the love that you feel for your parents or for a close friend? It is even more complicated to describe such relationships with God. So the word baruch stands for a great many things and is a very difficult word to define or translate.

ATTAH אַתָּה

Seeing the word attah, "you" in the formula of the b'rachah, should give us pause, for it is used to address God. It is interesting that in Hebrew the same word, attah, can be used to talk to your father, your brother, your close friend, as well as to God. In some foreign languages a difference is made between addressing someone who is familiar to you and speaking with someone who is in a position of authority or responsibility over you. So, for example, in French the formal second person word of address is *vous*, and the familiar form of address is *tu*. In German, the same division is made, with the word *Sie* used as the formal second person address, and *du* used for the familiar. (Old English, too, had a similar distinction between formal and familiar.) In Hebrew, however, we have one word which is used for both formal and personal address. That implies that we approach God on at least two levels: we can look to God as someone personal and intimate with whom we can relate and, at the same time, as our Master and Ruler.

You may be familiar with lines beginning, *Avinu Malkenu*, "Our Father, our King." To address God as both Father and King implies that we are at once intimate with God and at the same time subservient to Him. The word attah speaks to both of these relationships. God is near and, at the same time, distant and commanding. Again, attah implies a relationship, and is not easy to define. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber spoke of two basic kinds of relationships between people and between things. On the one hand, said Buber, we relate in an *I-it* fashion to objects in the world. We use an object, like a chair, which is only in relationship to us as long as we need it. The other type of relationship is *I-Thou*, which involves human beings related to one another with the sum of their relationship being much greater than the sum of the parts. Our relationship to God is much like this *I-Thou* relationship, a back and forth growing and experiencing of two souls. This simple word attah, then, is most complicated to understand for it speaks about our fundamental relationships with the Divine.

ADONAI

This word has often been translated “Lord” and the question arises of how we differentiate *Adonai* from the following word *Elohaynu*. *Adonai* as it is used here is really the personal name of the God of Israel. Just as each one of us has a first name, so, too, the God of Israel has a personal, private name. In Jewish tradition the real name of God (which uses the Hebrew letters *Yod, Hay, Vov, Hay*) is never pronounced as it was originally, out of a deep respect and love for God, and through the ages became lost to us. The word is often abbreviated as ה', which stands for “The” (Name of God). *Adonai* literally means “my master” or “my Lord” and has come to stand for the personal name of God. It also comes to represent God’s qualities of mercy, and His unchanging nature.

ELOHAYNU אֱלֹהֵינוּ

Elohaynu means “our God.” It is based on the words *elohim*, a more general term for God. (In fact, even the gods of other nations are referred to as *elohim*.) We may answer the question “Who is our God?” by stating “*Adonai Elohaynu*,” “*Adonai* is our God.” Notice, too, that we have used the second person word of address (*attah*) and now we are using the first person plural as the suffix. Another switch from second to third person occurs when we reach a later part of the *b'rachah*, as well. These shifts enable us to relate, again, on many different levels as individuals, as a community, personally, and publicly to God. Both words, *Adonai* and *elohaynu*, which stand for God, are almost impossible to define, for how do you define God? *Elohaynu* has also developed to be associated with God’s attributes of justice.

MELECH מֶלֶךְ

At first glance the word *melech*, King, might seem like a simple expression derived from a time in history when the supreme ruler of any country was a king. Therefore, God was considered the Absolute Ruler, the King of kings. But when we examine the word in greater depth and consider the implications of sovereignty, we realize how complicated a word it is. As explained before, our relationship to this King is not the common variety. We are at once the King’s subjects and His children. So this use of *melech* implies a relationship which is hard to define. Moreover, the concepts involved in sovereignty, such as rulership, benevolence, authority, responsibility, leadership, control, and power, all make this word extremely powerful and difficult to define. So again we see an extremely abstract word used in this basic liturgical formula.

HA'OLAM הָעוֹלָם

Ha'olam means “the universe.” When we use a word to mean everything, in a way it means nothing. For how can one define the universe? A definition implies setting something apart so that it is distinct from other things. When a word stands for everything, it is almost meaningless, because it can’t be defined. Therefore, this word, too, is extremely abstract and difficult for us to comprehend.

Now look back over the first six words of the *b'rachah*. As you reread the words, thinking about the analysis of each, you may feel a bit uncomfortable. What you thought you understood before has suddenly become much more complex and difficult to understand. Indeed, that is part of what those six words are meant to do. They are meant to complicate. They are meant to expand our horizons. For God to be God we cannot understand what God is. If we understood totally, that would diminish God’s power; we could be God. But as human beings we have a need to relate to the Divine. We have a need to call out to something greater than ourselves. Our easiest and most common way of communicating and relating is through the use of words. So, in addition to their “meaning,” the first six words of a *bracha* are almost, but not quite, nonsense syllables. They mean so much, that they almost mean nothing.