



DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

*Viewing the words of the Bible through the eyes of their ancient authors.
Learning about life from its time-tested wisdom and values.*

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Our Father's Prayer for the Fathers on Earth

By Jim Myers

For the followers of the Jewish Jesus, praying was a ritual that consisted of much more than just saying the words. It was the human side of an unending dialogue between God and humans. Prayer was a daily ritual of life and their prayers were not spontaneous individual prayers that asked God for something or asked Him to do something. *They prayed prayers that reminded them of things God wanted them to do!*

They also thought about God in a very different way than members of our “*it’s-all-about-me*” consumer society. In our society it is common for people to think of themselves as “*God’s buddy and the center of His attention.*” When they think about Him, they have warm fuzzy feelings associated with love. The Jewish society of Jesus viewed God, and approaching Him at the Temple or in prayer, as a very serious matter. *Psalm 33* gives us a glimpse of their mindset.

- *God’s work is done in faithfulness.*
- *God loves tzedaqah (righteousness).*
- *God loves misphat (justice).*
- *God’s hesed (loyalty/lovingkindness) fills the earth.*
- *Let all the earth fear the Lord.*
- *Let all the dwellers of the world stand in awe of Him.*

When people approached God they knew that before He listened to their words He examined their hearts to see their thoughts and imaginations. They were aware of power of their God -- the *Creator of the Heavens and Earth*, the One that caused the Great Flood, and the Ultimate Judge that will judge all nations on the *Great Day of Judgment*. They approached Him with *awe* and *fear* – *not warm fuzzy feelings*.

They viewed themselves as God’s partners in making the words of their prayers come to pass. That was a role they had been created to fulfill. This made them very valuable and important to God and to their fellow humans. They knew Who they were approaching and He knew them.

Kavanah

The Lord's Prayer, like many other Jewish prayers, was prayed from memory or read. Jewish sages taught that people must pray all prayers with "*kavanah*," which requires "*putting their whole heart into each word*." *It means to think about each word as if it was your word and meet every word as if it is your first time to pray it -- even though you have prayed the prayer hundreds of times before.*

A lesson about *kavanah* can be seen in the encounter Jesus had with a scribe that asked a very important question -- "*Which commandment is the greatest commandment in the Torah?*" Jesus answered -- "*You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*" ^{Matthew 22:37} Now I have a question for you. *When should people love God?* Most people say, "*All of time!*" I agree, so when you pray do it with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind! That's *kavanah*!

The rabbis told a story about a simple man's struggle to pray, to teach people about *kavanah*.

A simple man came to the synagogue once. During most of the service, he just sat and listened, for he did not know very much. He could not even read the Hebrew of the prayerbook. All around him the members of the congregation were standing in prayer, each man speaking with God in a whisper.

The simple man wished to speak with God, too. He wished to tell God what a magnificent world He had made. He wished to thank the Lord for the blessings of health and life. But he could not find the right words to say. When he thought his heart would break from shame and sadness, he said:

"O God, I cannot speak a beautiful prayer for You because I am a simple man and I have forgotten what I studied. I am not good with words. But You, O Lord, You know how to do everything. So I will give You the Alef Bet (Hebrew alphabet) and You can make a beautiful prayer for Yourself." Then he recited, "Alef . . . Bet . . . Gimel . . . Dalet . . ."

Of all the prayers spoken that day, this one was the dearest to God.¹

The Shema

The *Shema* is one of the oldest prayers in the history of the Jewish people. They were praying it centuries before the birth of Jesus, and they are still praying it today. During the Second Temple period when Jesus lived and taught in Israel, the *Shema* was prayed twice every day at the Temple at the time sacrifices were offered. The *Shema* opens with these words:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

When Jesus answers the scribe's question about "*the greatest commandment*" he quoted the second line of the *Shema* -- *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength*. However, Jesus didn't stop there, he added something:

*The second is like it:
'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* Matthew 22:38-39

For Jesus the performance of the greatest commandment was completely dependent on the performance of the second commandment.

*You love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul,
and with all your strength **by** loving your neighbor as yourself!*

In other words, a person cannot love God without loving their neighbor first! This could have huge implications, especially at the Temple, if a large number of people adopted Jesus's interpretation of the words of the *Shema*. Think about huge crowds praying the words below twice every day:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!
Your shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul,
and with all your strength by loving your neighbor as yourself!*

The *Sadducees* and *Pharisees* controlled the Temple. Most priests were *Sadducees* and they were responsible for performing all of the rituals at the Temple. The *Pharisees* controlled the *Sanhedrin*, the highest court in the nation. It made the rulings that determined how those rituals would be performed and who would do them. What would happen if the *Sadducees* and *Pharisees* became just as concerned "people loving their neighbors as themselves" as they were about "people paying the correct amount of tithes" or "people being ritually pure when they entered the Temple"? What if they required proof that the one presenting a sacrifice "loved his neighbor as himself before they performed the ritual?"

But Jesus's interpretation could have even further ramifications that would reached far beyond the Temple, when we view them in their full context, which begins in Deuteronomy 6:1-2:

*Now this is **the commandment**, and these are the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded **to teach you**, that **you may observe them** in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that **you may fear the LORD your God**, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which **I commanded you, you and your son** and **your son's son** all the days of your life, so that your days may be prolonged.*

The Hebrew word "*Torah*" is usually translated as "*The Law*" in non-Jewish writings; however in the Jewish culture it also means "*The Instructions*." God's commandments are instructions as well as laws. They were given "so people could observe them and their lives, the lives of their children and the lives of their grandchildren may be prolonged."

*And these words which I command **you** today shall be upon **your** heart. **You** shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when **you** sit in **your** house, when **you** walk by the way, when **you** lie down, and when **you** rise up. **You** shall bind them as a sign on **your** hand, and they shall be as frontlets between **your** eyes. **You** shall write them on the doorposts of **your** house and on **your** gates.*

All of the underlined words above are *masculine singular*, which means they are references to “a male that has a child” – **a father**. This is a commandment given to *fathers* about “*how to be a father*.” God chose to put the fate of the nation into the hands of the fathers of the children of Israel -- *not the priests!* Twice a day, every day, the fathers of Israel, their wives and children prayed a prayer that repeated God’s instructions for fathers in their homes, usually at the beginning and end of the day. *Everyone learned about fatherhood together!*

Now let’s read the key words of the prayer with *kavanah*, and see if we can get a feel for what the ancient readers thought of as they read them. We begin with Deuteronomy 6:1-3:

- *This is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them.*
- *Fear the Lord your God to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your son’s son all the days of your lives.*
- *So that your days may be prolonged . . . and it may be well (TOV) with you.*

The next line contains the words from which the prayer gets its name:

- *Hear (Shema), O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!*

The Hebrew word *shema*, means to “*hear and obey*.”

- *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.*

The followers of Jesus would include:

- *by loving your neighbor as yourself!*

The next section gives specific instructions about how the fathers will teach their children:

- *Teach the Instructions by repeating them and saying them again and again.*
- *Talk about the Instructions when you sit in your house.*
- *Talk about the Instructions when you walk on the road.*
- *Talk about the Instructions when you lie down.*
- *Talk about the Instructions when you rise up.*
- *Bind the Instructions on your hand as a sign.*
- *Place the Instructions between your eyes as a memorial.*



This is a picture of Asael Lubotzky, an IDF soldier, fulfilling the last two instructions.² Notice the small box on his forehead (between his eyes) and the leather strap wound around his arm and hand with another small box above his elbow. He is holding and praying from a prayerbook. The set of small black leather boxes is called *tefillin* or *phylacteries*. They contain small parchment scrolls inscribed with verses from the Torah. The instructions from Deuteronomy are also found in Exodus 13:9, 16:

And it shall be for a sign for you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes, that the Torah of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand did the Lord bring you out of Egypt . . . And it shall be for a sign upon your hand, and as a sign between your eyes; for with a mighty hand did the Lord bring us forth out of Egypt.

Why put Instructions on your hand and between your eyes? In my opinion, one reason is to help remember the roles hands and eyes have played in sins that are recorded in the Bible. Most sins don't seem to be planned in advance. Something catches someone's attention and then the hands become involved -- *a sequence that can be traced back to the first sin in the Bible.*

Adam **watched** the discussion between the serpent and Eve . . . and he **took** the forbidden fruit from her hand and ate it.

By the way, Adam was given a commandment with the *masculine singular* "you," too. He didn't have any children, but he taught Eve God's commandment -- *but he added a few words of his own to it.* He also did not protect her from the serpent. As a teacher and husband he blew it!

Jesus used an example related to the roles of eyes and hands in his teaching on adultery. His words have definitely attracted the attention of many male readers.

*If your right **eye** causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you . . . And if your right **hand** causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you.* Matthew 5:29-30

Now let's return to the *Shema's* instructions for fathers.

- Write the instructions on the doorposts of your house.
- Write the instructions on your gates.



Today, Jewish people use *mezuzahs*, like the one in the picture, to fulfill this commandment. The Hebrew word *mezuzah* means "doorpost." It is made of a decorative case that contains a small parchment called a *klaf* upon which the Hebrew verses of the *Shema* are inscribed. It acts as a reminder for the family – *when they leave and return* – and as a sign about the family that lives in the house for visitors.

The Kingdom of Heaven

The *Shema* played another very important role in the lives of the people of Israel.

- *Reciting the Shema is an action that acknowledges God's kingship in a person's life.*
- *It is the rejection of all forms of idolatry.*
- *When one recites the Shema the Lord is made King and the Kingdom of Heaven is realized.*²
- *Whoever recites the Shema has accepted the 'yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.'*
- *Reciting the Shema is the first step to receiving the 'yoke of the commandments.'*³
- *Praying the Shema is a demonstration of "God's reign in one's life;" a manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven.*

The *Kingdom of Heaven* was important to the Pharisees, other sects and Jesus for another reason – *it played an important role in their teachings about the end of days and the Great Day of Judgment.* I will call this the "*Messianic Kingdom of Heaven.*" The Pharisees taught that it would appear on earth after the *Great Day of Judgment* when the earth had been cleansed of sin and sinners.

For Jesus and his followers, the *Messianic Kingdom of Heaven* was already on the earth, spreading rapidly and Jesus was leading it. Its role was to prepare people for the *Great Day of Judgment* so they could receive their inheritance. Jesus had a different requirement for "*accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven*" and becoming part of it:

"Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and His tzedaqah (righteousness) . . ." Matthew 6:33

You may remember from page 1 that *tzedaqah* is one of the things God loves.

Tzedaqah (righteousness)

Jesus based his core teachings about *tzedaqah* on Isaiah 58.

Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and do not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your tzedaqah (righteousness) shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall gather you.

Now compare Isaiah's description of *tzedaqah* to his teachings about the *Great Day of Judgment* (Matthew 25:31-46):

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me' . . . the righteous will go away into eternal life."

So, what is *tzedakah*? That is question that every "follower of Yeshua" knew the answer to by heart. Almost everything Yeshua did and taught was linked to *doing acts of tzedakah*. Isaiah 32:17-18 helps us better understand what *tzedakah* means in the Jewish culture:

*The work of tzedakah shall be shalom
and the effect of tzedakah shall be safety that continues forever.
My people will dwell in a pasture of shalom,
in dwelling places of safety and secure resting places.*

Tzedakah is something that one does to create "shalom." *Shalom* is often translated "peace" in English, but it actually "connotes totality, health, wholesomeness, harmony, success, the completeness and richness of living in an integrated social milieu." The lives of people in *Isaiah 58* and *Matthew 25* lacked things and were not *shalom*. The acts of *tzedakah* -- food, water, clothes, shelter, companionship, etc. -- made their lives *shalom*. Acts of *tzedakah* are anything required to make a person's life *shalom* -- from giving money to giving their time and attention.

The Return of Elijah the Prophet

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.

The above words are from *Malachi 4:5-6*. They were a well-known end of time prophesy. Jesus taught that *John the Baptist was Elijah* and when John began teaching -- *the countdown to the Great Day of Judgment began*. John was fulfilling the role of Elijah prophesied by *Malachi* -- "turning the hearts of the fathers to their children." The fathers would make the words of the *Shema* realities in Israel. Jesus continued that process by adding his teachings to the Instructions of the fathers. The actions of fathers that belonged to the Jesus movement no doubt caught the attention of those they knew them the best -- especially their children and wives.

Our Father

The phrase "Our Father" has generated lots of controversy over centuries. A number of Christian sources state matter-of-factly that the words "Our Father" are both un-Hebrew and un-Jewish. They claimed that addressing God as "our Father" was revolutionary and would consequently have shaken the very foundations of the Jewish world. According to them, *Jesus's message was something entirely new and alien for the Jewish audience to whom he*

preached. However, there is one small problem – **they are completely wrong**⁶ All we need to go back to Isaiah to find a reference to “our Father in Heaven.”

Look down from heaven, and see from Your habitation, holy and glorious . . .
Doubtless You are **our Father** . . . You, O LORD, are **our Father**; our Redeemer from
Everlasting is Your name. ^{Isaiah 63:15-16}

There are many references in Jewish writings in which the words “our Father” appear. However, an important thing is missing from the minds of Americans who pray the Lord’s Prayer. It is *the powerful image of a father that we have learning about through the Shema.*

- *Think about all of the roles fathers were given in the Shema.*
- *Consider the amount of attention and time the fathers invested in their children.*
- *Think about the confidence God placed in the fathers to prepare children to be His people.*
- *Think about the impact they had on the lives of their wives, neighbors and communities.*

Now combine all of the things we have discussed above and connect them to “Our Father.” That is **Who** the followers of Jesus prepared themselves to approach before they prayed.

*May Our Father’s Prayer for the Fathers on Earth inspire and help everyone
that prays The Lord’s Prayer reveal the image of Our Father
through their lives on earth. Amen!*

July Memorials

In Loving Memory

**MARJORIE
NEELLEY
PITNER**

**December 30, 1914
July 17, 2007**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to seek those
qualities of mind and heart which they
shared when we walked life’s journey
together. May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and noblest
strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our loyalty to
those things which we valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion. As long as
we live, they too will live; for they are now a
part of us, as we remember them.*¹²

In Loving Memory

**FANNIE EDNA
GRAHAM
WARD**

**July 15, 1891
July 10, 1982**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

¹ *When a Jew Prays* by Seymour Rossel with Eugene B. Borowitz and Hyman Chanover, © 1973 by Behrman House, Inc., New York, NY; pp. 30-31.

² https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IDF_soldier_put_on_tefillin.jpg

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezuzah>

⁴ *Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus’ Teachings* by Brad H. Young © 1989; Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ; p. 197.

⁵ *A Prayer to Our Father: Hebrew Origins of the Lord’s Prayer* by Nehemia Gordon and Keith Johnson, © 2009; p. 87-90.