

Hello everyone!

Thank you to everyone who joined us for the Learner's Minyan this week. The goal of the Learner's minyan is to increase accessibility to our prayers and tradition. We do this by studying the texts of the prayers and talking about their meaning, by singing and praying together, and by creating open space where everyone can bring their questions.

I want to share a quick recap of what we learned together:

We began by sharing our own experiences with these two statements:

One thing that I love about prayer / Shabbat services is _____

One thing that challenges me about prayer / Shabbat services is _____

The Siddur, the prayerbook, is a collage: it contains Biblical passages, poetry, blessings, and liturgical songs. Many siddurim, including ours also have modern commentaries or readings as well. Thus, the siddur connects us to Jews throughout all time in this collage of prayers.

The Siddur has a structure: Birchot haShachar (morning blessings), Pezukei Dzimra (verses of song), the Shema and blessings, the Amidah, Torah reading, musaf and closing prayers.

The Birchot haShachar help us start our morning with gratitude. We begin our services by saying thank you for all the wonderful ways our bodies work, for the gift of our souls, for the ability to gather in community. One of the first blessings we say is thanking God for giving roosters wisdom to discern day from night. How does my day start if I begin by thanking God not for my own wisdom, but for that of the rooster?

The Pezukei Dzimra, verses of song, is a collection of Psalms that help get us warmed up for prayer. Our Talmud teaches, in tractate Brachot, that the 'pious ones of old' would sit for an hour before they began praying. This

would help them focus their hearts and minds onto the prayers. Our Psalms today can help us focus and center ourselves.

One of my teachers, Rabbah Dorothy Richman, taught me that *zimra* can also mean 'prune'. Before we begin the work of prayer, we first prune away the excess thoughts and distractions that we're carrying around, bringing our focus to the things we want to share with God and community.

Pezukei Dzimra opens with the *Baruch She'amar* prayer, which recalls how God created the world through speech. This prayer also reminds us the power we have to impact the world through speech. Beginning our day thinking about the power of speech, we give ourselves a chance to be mindful and pay attention to our words.

We now see a collection of Psalms, many of which have beautiful melodies set to them. The Great Hodu (Psalm 136) tells a story of the many ways God acts in our world. It begins with God as Creator of Earth, a universal God, shifts in the middle the miracles God did for the Jewish people (such as the Exodus) and then closes with God providing sustenance to the whole earth.

There's a special Psalm for each day of the week, and the one for Shabbat is Psalm 92. This places us in time, reminding us *when* and *where* we are in Jewish time.

We now turn to the Ashrei (Psalm 145). It begins with King David's own personal praise, "I will bless God", speaks of God's kindness and actions in the world at large, and closes with a universal "all creation will bless God". Ashrei is a beautifully universalist prayer, which leads us into the next few Psalms (146-149) that speak of how Creation praises God. The snow, the oceans, fire and smoke, all offer praise. Our Siddur paints a picture of an orchestra of Nature.

Which brings us to the closing Psalm 150. Psalm 150 says “praise God with harps, shofars, drums, lyres, cymbals”, and then closes with “let every soul-breath praise God”. Humanity has heard the orchestra of nature, and now we echo it with instruments. I think there’s two ways we can read this closing line, “*kol haneshama t’hallel yah*” could mean “everything that is a live praises God”, or it could be a direction: “let all of my breaths, like every word and breath and action I take today, be in praise of my Creator.”

This verse connects us directly to the prayer: *nishmat kol chai*, which says, “everything with soul-breath praises God.”

I’ll share with you my favorite line of this prayer: *ilu finu malei shira kayam* -- even if our mouths were filled with song like the sea, or we could run as fast as deer, or our arms could spread like eagle’s wings -- still we could not praise our Creator enough.

We began our day celebrating the wisdom God gave to the rooster; we end this section of prayers with humility towards nature. We just spent awhile praising God, and now we accept that it’s still not enough.

Our siddur is giving us tools to begin our morning: gratitude, awareness of speech, connection to all the peoples of the earth, the power and beauty of nature, and finally, humility.

With those values in mind, we are ready to begin the main section of the service. Come back on Dec 7th for the next Learner’s Minyan. Shavua tov, have a good week!