

Introduction to the Liturgy

What to Look for in the Service

Liturgy can seem confusing, more like a shapeless mass of verbiage than a carefully constructed whole; a jumble of noise, not a symphony; a blotch of random colors, hardly a masterpiece of art. But prayer *is* an art form, and like the other arts, the first step to appreciation is to recognize the pattern at work within it.

There are three daily services: morning (*Shacharit*), afternoon (*Minchah*), and evening (*Ma'ariv* or *Arvit*). For the sake of convenience, the latter two are usually recited in tandem, one just before dark, and the other immediately after the sun sets. All three follow the same basic structure, but the morning service is the most complete. It is composed of seven consecutive units that build upon each other to create a definitive pattern. Though the words of each unit remained fluid for centuries, the structural integrity of the service has remained sacrosanct since the beginning.

Services are made of prayers, but not all prayers are alike. Some are biblical quotations, ranging in size from a single line to entire chapters, usually psalms. There are rabbinic citations also, chunks of Mishnah or Talmud that serve as a sort of Torah study within the service. Medieval poetry occurs here too, familiar things like *Adon Olam* or older staples marked less by rhyme and rhythm than by clever word plays and alphabetic acrostics. And there are long passages of prose, the work again of medieval spiritual masters, but couched in standard rabbinic style without regard for poetic rules.

Most of all, however, the Siddur is filled with blessings, a uniquely rabbinic vehicle for addressing God, and the primary liturgical expression of Jewish spirituality.

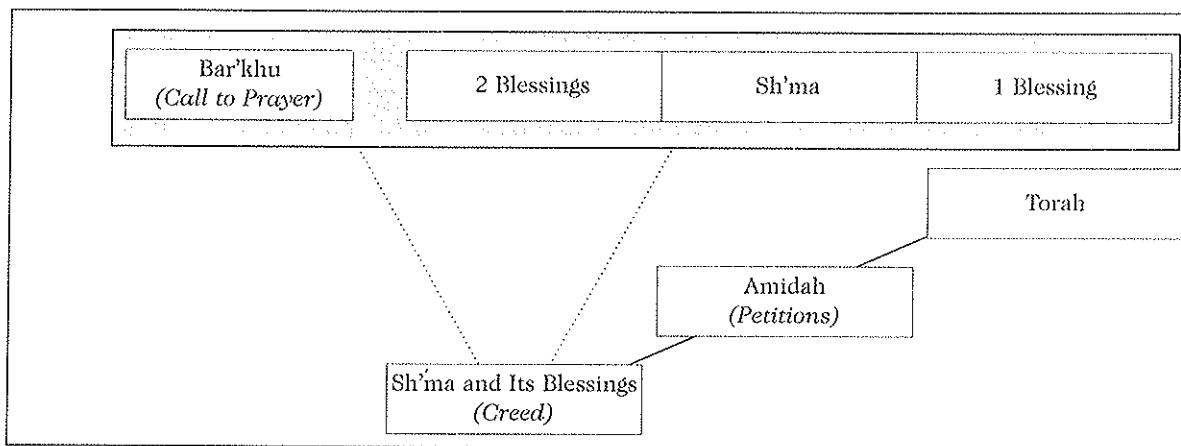
Blessings (known also as *benedictions*, or, in Hebrew, *b'rakhot*—sing., *b'rakah*) are so familiar that Jewish worshippers take them for granted. We are mostly aware of “short blessings,” the one-line formulas that are customarily recited before eating, for instance, or prior to performing a commandment. But there are “long blessings” too, generally whole paragraphs or even sets of paragraphs on a given theme. These are best thought of as small theological essays on such topics as deliverance, the sanctity of time, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the like. They sometimes start with the words *Barukh atah Adonai . . .* (“Blessed are You, Adonai . . .”), and then they are easily spotted. But more frequently, they begin with no particular verbal formula, and are hard to identify until their last line, which invariably does say, *Barukh atah Adonai . . .* (“Blessed are You, Adonai . . .”) followed by a short

synopsis of the blessing's theme ("... who sanctifies the Sabbath," "... who hears prayer," "... who redeems Israel," and so forth). This final summarizing sentence is called a *chatimah*, meaning a "seal," like the seal made from a signet ring that seals an envelope.

The bulk of the service as it was laid down in antiquity consists of strings of blessings, one after the other, or of biblical quotations bracketed by blessings that introduce and conclude them. By the tenth century, the creation of blessings largely ceased, and eventually, Jewish law actually opposed the coining of new ones, on the grounds that post-talmudic Judaism was too spiritually unworthy to try to emulate the literary work of the giants of the Jewish past. Not all Jews agree with that assessment today, but the traditional liturgy that forms our text here contains no blessings dated later than the tenth century.

The word we use to refer to all the literary units in the prayer book, without regard to whether they are blessings, psalms, poems, or something else, is *rubric*. A rubric is any discrete building block of the service, sometimes a single prayer (this blessing rather than that, or this quotation, but not that poem), and sometimes a whole set of prayers that stands out in contrast to other sets: The *Sh'ma and Its Blessings*, for instance, the topic of this entire volume, is a large rubric relative to the *Amidah* (the topic of Volume Two). But considered independently, we can say that the *Sh'ma and Its Blessings* subsumes smaller rubrics: the *Sh'ma* itself, for instance (a set of biblical readings); some blessings that bracket it; and the *Bar'khu*, or official call to prayer, that introduces the entire thing.

At the liturgy's core are three large rubrics, not only the two already mentioned (the *Sh'ma and Its Blessings* and the *Amidah*—known also as the *T'fillah* or *Sh'moneh Esreh*), but also the public reading of Torah. The *Sh'ma and Its Blessings* and the *Amidah* were recited every day; Torah is read on Monday and Thursday (market days in antiquity), when crowds were likely to gather in the cities, and on Shabbat and holidays, of course. The *Sh'ma and Its Blessings* is essentially the Jewish creed, a statement of what Jews have traditionally affirmed about God, the cosmos and our human relationship to God and to history. The *Amidah* is largely petitionary. The Torah reading is a recapitulation of Sinai, an attempt to discover the will of God through sacred scripture. Since the *Sh'ma and Its Blessings* begins the official service, it features a communal call to prayer at the beginning: our familiar *Bar'khu*. We should picture these units building upon each other in a crescendo-like manner, as follows:

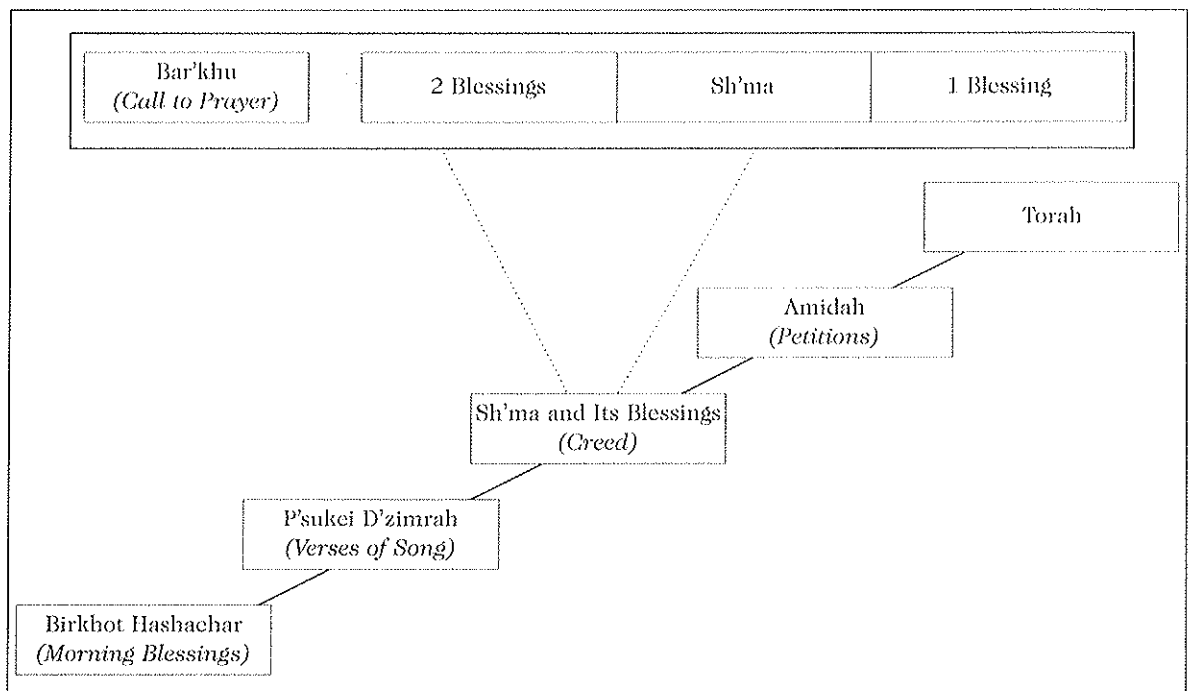


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It is, however, hard for individuals who are normally distracted by everyday concerns to constitute a community given over wholeheartedly to prayer. Already in the second century, therefore, we hear of some Rabbis who assembled prior to the actual Call to Prayer in order to sing psalms of praise known as a *Hallel*; and even before that — at home, not the synagogue — it was customary to begin the day immediately upon awakening by reciting a series of daily blessings along with some study texts. By the ninth century, if not earlier, these two units too had become mandatory, and the home ritual for awakening had moved to the synagogue, which is where we have it today. The warm-up section of psalms is called *P'sukei D'zimrah* — meaning “Verses of Song” — and the prior recital of daily blessings and study texts is called *Birkhot Hashachar* — “Morning Blessings.” Since they now precede the main body of the service, gradually building up to it, the larger diagram can be charted like this:



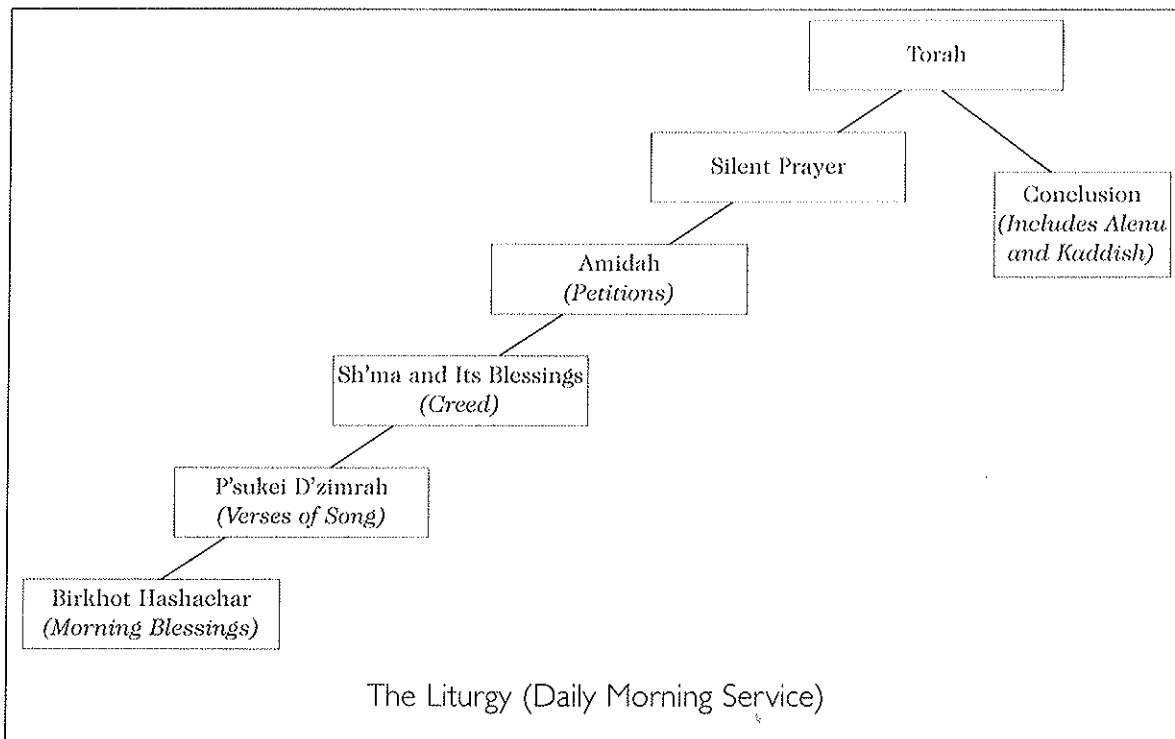
Two other expansions of this basic structure probably occurred in the first two centuries C.E., although our evidence for their being that early is less certain.

First, a Conclusion was added. It featured a final prayer called the *Kaddish* which as yet had nothing to do with mourning, but merely followed the Torah reading, and therefore closed the service, by looking ahead to the coming of God's ultimate reign of justice. Eventually other prayers were added to the Conclusion, including the *Alenu*, which had originally been composed as an introduction to the blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, but was moved here in the Middle Ages.

Second, the Rabbis, who were keenly aware of the limits to human mortality, advised all Jews to come to terms daily with their frailty and ethical imperfection. To do so, they provided an opportunity for a silent confession following the *Amidah*, but before the Torah reading. In time, this evolved into silent prayer in general, an

opportunity for individuals to assemble their most private thoughts before God; and later still, sometime in the Middle Ages, it expanded on average weekdays into an entire set of supplicatory prayers called the *Tachanun*.

The daily service was thus passed down to us with shape and design. Beginning with daily blessings that celebrate the new day and emphasize the study of sacred texts (*Birkhot Hashachar*) it continues with songs and psalms (*P'sukei D'zimrah*) designed to create a sense of community. There then follows the core of the liturgy: an official call to prayer (our *Bar'khu*), the recital of Jewish belief (the *Sh'ma and Its Blessings*) and communal petitions (the *Amidah*). Individuals then pause to speak privately to God in silent prayer (later expanded into the *Tachanun*), and then, on select days, they read from Torah. The whole concludes with a final *Kaddish* to which other prayers, most notably the *Alenu*, were added eventually.



On Shabbat and holidays, this basic structure expands to admit special material relevant to the day in question, and contracts to omit prayers that are inappropriate for the occasion. On Shabbat, for instance, the petitions of the *Amidah* are excluded, as Shabbat is felt to be so perfect in itself as to make petitioning unnecessary. But an entire service is added, a service called *Musaf* (literally, "Addition"), to correspond to the extra sacrifice that once characterized Shabbat worship in the Temple. Similarly, a prophetic reading called the *Haftarah* joins the Torah reading, and extra psalms and readings for the Sabbath are inserted here and there. The same is true for holidays when, in addition, numerous *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) get said, especially for the High Holy Days, when the sheer size of the liturgy seems to get out of hand. But even there, the basic structure remains intact, so that those who know

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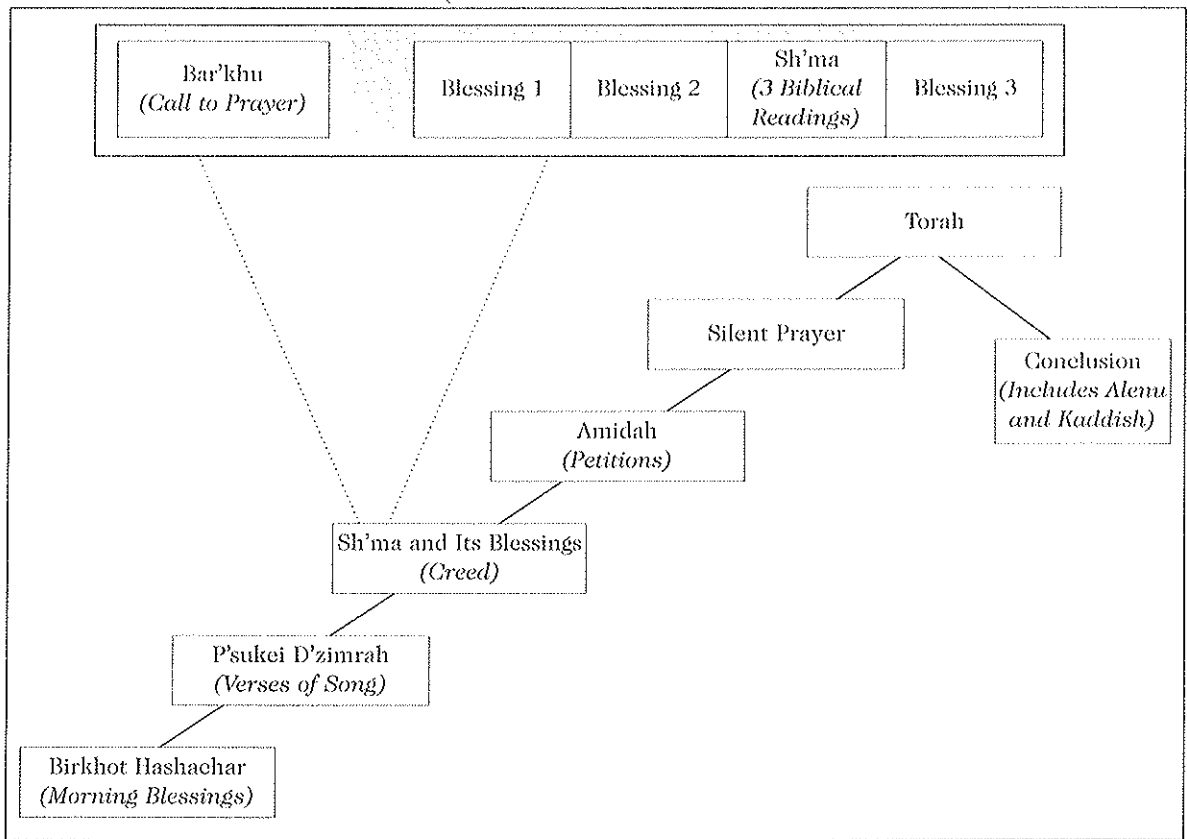
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its intrinsic shape can get beyond what looks like random verbiage to find the genius behind the liturgy's design.

THE SH'MA AND ITS BLESSINGS: WHAT DO JEWS BELIEVE?

This volume deals in detail with the *Sh'ma and Its Blessings*, which can further be divided into three units:

1. Three biblical citations that make up the *Sh'ma* itself;
2. The Call to Prayer with which the unit starts;
3. Three blessings that surround the *Sh'ma*, giving it its full name, *Sh'ma and Its Blessings*.

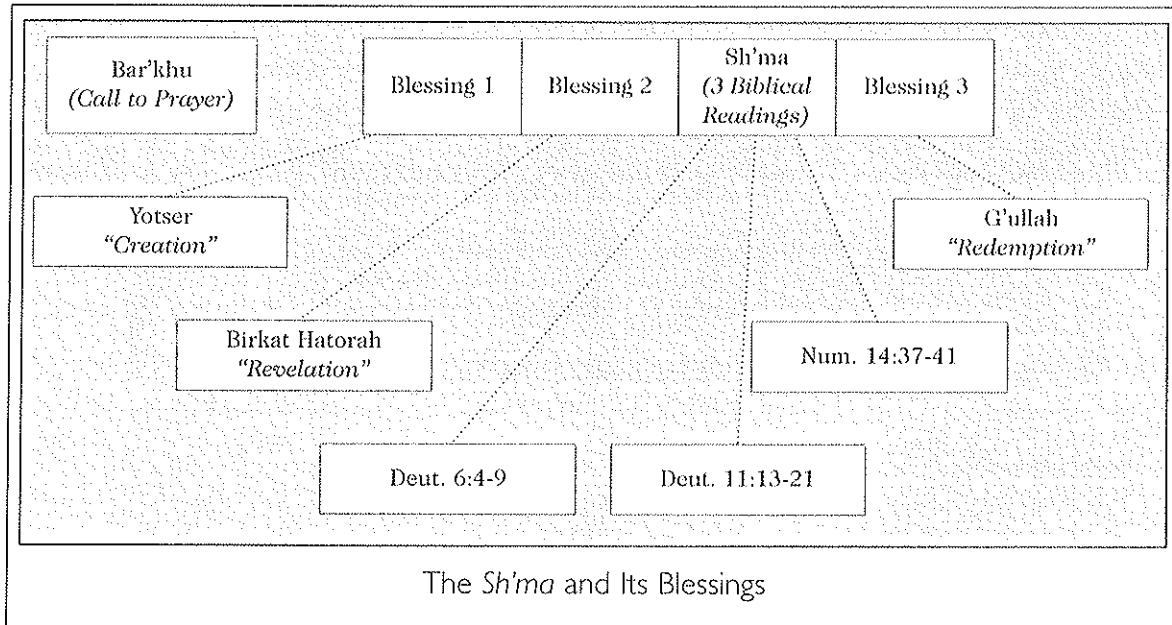


This liturgical statement of Jewish faith is recited in the service for morning and evening (but not afternoon). A later volume handles the evening recitation. Here, we concentrate on the morning version, which features three accompanying blessings, known as the *Yotser* (literally, “. . . who creates,” and thus, colloquially, “Creation”), *Birkat Hatorah* (“The Blessing over Torah,” literally, but generally just called “Revelation”) and *G’ullah* (“Redemption”). Taken together with the *Sh'ma*, which is a set of biblical citations highlighting the absolute singularity of God, the rubric affirms our faith in one and only one God, who created the universe, revealed the Torah to Israel, and will someday redeem the world from injustice and strife.

MY PEOPLE'S PRAYER BOOK

The *Sh'ma* is interrupted by a final addition: a single congregational response, *Barukh shem . . .* ("Blessed is the One, the glory of whose kingdom is renowned forever"). It affirms the promise that God alone rules the universe, thereby highlighting the final tenet of the creed, the ultimate redemption that Jews hold out as the hope of history.

The full chart for the *Sh'ma and Its Blessings* thus looks like this:



The *Sh'ma and Its Blessings* may be the oldest rubric that we have. The Mishnah (c. 200 C.E.) records a version that may have been said in the Temple. Jewish historian Josephus (c. 37–95) knows that the *Sh'ma* in some form or other was recited twice daily. The first line of the *Sh'ma* is often the first thing memorized, and the first prayer recited regularly by Jewish children. It is traditionally also the last prayer said upon a deathbed. In a sense, then, it brackets each day as it brackets each individual's life, and can be said to constitute the most familiar and the most loving entryway into the Siddur.

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