

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 17:

The danger of using an established set of prayers is that prayer may become too routine. The rabbis felt it was important to establish the prayers because certain themes needed to be included, and in a way our prayers unite us as a nation. But this nationhood should not come at the cost of our personal relationships with G-d. The rabbis each had their own ways of keeping their prayers personal, teaching us that though we follow a script, we must also make the prayers our own and use them to come closer to G-d. This page is all about the ways these rabbis personalized their prayers. Rav Yerucham Levovitz says that Torah is medicine, but in order for it to work it must be used the right way. A sick person can't just take a random pill and expect to get better. You need to find the right part of the Torah to cure your specific ailments. By learning what these rabbis prayed for, we can see what personal struggles they faced and which specific aspects of the Torah they needed as medicine.

1. **Rav Safra:** At the end of his Amidah, he would say, "May it be Your will, Hashem our G-d, that You should create peace in the Heavenly realm and the earthly equivalent of that. And between the students who are studying your Torah, those who study Torah for its own sake and those who study not for its own sake. And those who study not for its own sake, may it be Your will that their hearts should turn over for them to study for its own sake." Who was Rav Safra? The gemara tells a number of stories about him. He was once in the middle of davening when a man approached him wanting to buy something. The man made him an offer, and he did not respond because he was in the middle of the Shema. Taking his silence as a refusal, the man upped his offer, and still Rav Safra did not respond. The man still thought Rav Safra was trying to negotiate, so he kept offering more and more money. By the time Rav Safra finished the Shema, the man was offering an obscene amount of money. But Rav Safra said he was willing to sell the item for the very first offer. He hadn't accepted it at the time only because he was saying the Shema, but he had heard it and considered it acceptable, so he would not ask for more even though more was offered. That's how important honesty was to Rav Safra. The gemara (Chullin 94b) tells another story: Rav Safra was once travelling with a group of rabbis and they encountered Mar Zutra. Mar Zutra thought this group of rabbis had specifically come out to greet him, and he was pleased. Rav Safra told him they had just happened by, but if they'd known he was there they would have gone even farther to greet him. Why tell him that and make him feel bad? Because Rav Safra wanted to be completely honest. He didn't want to fool Mar Zutra. From these stories, we can see how important honesty was to Rav Safra, so it makes sense that his prayer would be focused on truth and peace.
2. **Rabbi Alexandrei:** At the end of his Amidah, he would say, "May it be Your will, Hashem our G-d, that I be stood in the corner of light, and don't let me stand in a dark corner, and don't let my heart be down, and don't let my eyes be darkened." Maharsha explains the prayer in this way: Rashi says that in exile, we stand in a place of narrowness, as if we are stuck in a corner. We are confined and oppressed. But our eyes can adjust to the darkness, and even in exile we can find light. Rabbi Alexandrei was praying that G-d illuminate the corner of exile and bring in the light.
3. **Another version of his prayer.** "Master of the world, it's revealed in front of You that our will is to do Your will. Who is it that's holding us back? The sourdough starter in us and the oppression of being under the rule of anti-Semitic governments. May it be Your will that we be saved from them, and may we return to do the statutes of Your will with a complete heart." What does it mean that sourdough starter is holding us back? Sourdough starter, a leavening agent, is a metaphor for the yetzer hara. It's something that makes us arrogant and makes us desire things that aren't good for us. Sometimes, our own inclinations hold us back from doing G-d's will. And sometimes it is external forces, like governmental oppression or financial difficulties. This is a prayer for physical and emotional health and freedom from constraints.

4. **Rava:** At the end of his Amidah, he would say, “My G-d, before You created me, I wasn’t worthy of being created. And now that I have been created, in a certain sense it’s as if I wasn’t created. I am like dirt in my life; how much more so in death. I’m before You like a vessel of shame and embarrassment. May it be Your will, Hashem my G-d, that I don’t sin anymore, and that what I’ve already sinned, wipe away with Your great compassion, but not through afflictions and illnesses.” A debate is recorded between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, where Beit Hillel says that people are worthy of being born and Beit Shammai says they are not. In the battle against the yetzer hara, there are two things that must be balanced: the need to feel special and the need for humility. Beit Shammai saw humility as more important, and therefore said that people aren’t worthy of being born. Beit Hillel had a more positive outlook, saying that people are worthy of being born and should feel special. Rava was warning himself to make sure his life was meaningful, because otherwise it would be like he didn’t even exist. Rav Hamnuna would recite this same prayer on Yom Kippur as his *vidui* (confession of sin). Rav Soloveitchik says there’s a big difference between dirt and ashes. Ashes are completely burned and useless. Nothing can be done with them. But dirt is earth. It may seem lowly, but it is the foundation that causes things to grow. It contains nutrients to feed seeds and make them sprout. When we say we are like dirt, what we mean is that we want to be a source of growth. When we submit ourselves to other people, we can be like the soil that helps them grow.
5. **Mar Brei Deravina:** At the end of his Amidah, he would say, “My G-d, help my tongue from speaking badly and my lips from speaking deceit, and those who curse me, let me be silent to them, and may my soul be like dirt to everyone. Open my heart in Your Torah, and in Your mitzvot let my soul run towards. Save me from bad encounters, from the yetzer hara, and from an evil woman, and from all bad occurrences that happen. Whoever thinks badly of me, quickly undo their plot and ruin their thoughts.” For the most part we want to be like the earth and help the people around us grow, and we don’t want to cause harm to others. But that doesn’t mean we need to be doormats. If people want to hurt us, we want G-d to foil their plans. We want to be humble but we do not have to forgive people who do terrible things to us. This prayer of Mar Brei Deravina is what has been adapted into our prayer books at the end of the Amidah.
6. **Rav Sheshet:** After a fast he would say, “Master of the World, it’s clear in front of You that in the time of the Beit Hamikdash a person would sin and bring an offering for atonement, and all they’d bring on the altar would be the fat and the blood and they would attain atonement. Now, I sat in fasting and lessened my fat and my blood. May it be Your will in front of You that the lessening of my fat and blood should be as if I brought them as an offering on the altar, and You forgive me.” The Ramban famously teaches that people are like animals. But when we act too much like animals, we must atone. We do that by taking an actual animal and bringing it as an offering, as if to say that we recognize that the animal inside ourselves made us act inappropriately, and we offer this animal’s fat and blood in place of our own. Putting the sacrifice on the fire transforms the animal from the physical into the spiritual. So too, we must transform our own yetzer hara to be a force for good. We do not have offerings today, so instead we fast. Rabbi Nachman says that when we fast, we bring ourselves back to where we were before we sinned. Sins are like baggage that weigh down our essential being, and we want to give up that baggage. Fasting, with true intention, helps us get back to our essential being. Similarly, Reb Levi Yitchak of Berditchev says that sins are like additives that change something’s essential nature, and we can release those additives by going to the mikvah. The water of the mikvah represents a lack of color and additives, which helps bring us back to our pure selves. That happens with fasting as well.
7. **The rabbis of Yavneh had this mantra:** “I’m a creative person, and my friend is also creative. I work in the city and he works in the field. I get up and do my work, he gets up. He’s not looking

to do what I'm doing, and I'm not looking to do what he's doing." You might be tempted to say that the reason the friend doesn't want to sit and learn is he doesn't have time, or that he's not as smart. But that's not a good enough reason. Learning is about kavanah. A talmid chacham learns because he's happy doing it, because that's where his heart is. It's about where your heart is, not about how much you learn or how smart you are. There is another version of this gemara that says that just like the man working in the field isn't arrogant about it, so too a Torah scholar can't be arrogant about what he's doing. He should enjoy learning but shouldn't think his learning makes him better than other people. This was taught by the rabbis of Yavneh. Yavneh was a great center of Torah after the Destruction, and its scholars had to warn each other not to become arrogant. Though we do have a mitzvah to honor scholars, the scholars must still be humble. Even a king can't be arrogant.

8. **A saying that was on Rava's lips all the time:** "The purpose of wisdom is repentance and good deeds." Torah is not just academic, all about learning and not about doing. It's important to learn, but the whole point is so that you can do teshuva and good deeds. A person doesn't need to be a scholar to do teshuva and good deeds, but the more wisdom you have the more teshuva you have. With more wisdom, you can do teshuva on a deeper level.
9. **A saying that was on Rav's lips:** "The World to Come doesn't have eating, drinking, procreation, business, jealousy, or hatred. Rather, tzaddikim are sitting and their crowns are on their heads and they're benefitting from the radiance of G-d's presence." Rav Soloveitchik comments, isn't this obvious? Why did he need to state it? We say that if you do teshuva and good deeds in this world for even an hour, it's better than all of the afterlife. In this world we can do good deeds and we can raise ourselves higher, but once we are in *olam haba* (the World to Come) we will not be able to grow any more. So in a sense, we can get a piece of *olam haba* in this world that is even better than what we will find in *olam haba*. Rav Soloveitchik's teaching is often found in Chabad Chassidus. Perhaps that is why the Rambam says *olam haba* is a state that we can get to in our minds even in this world. And that's important, because we need to use our experiences in this world to set up what our *olam haba* will be. That's why Shabbat, a taste of *olam haba*, is so important. Understanding what *olam haba* is can help us start getting there even now.
10. **Rav and Shmuel, Rab Yochanan and Rabbi Elazar:** The rabbis argue about how the world is supported. One says G-d gives charity to the whole world, though it is undeserved, because of tzaddikim, but the tzaddikim themselves are deserving of support. The other opinion says the whole world is supported in the merit of tzaddikim, but the tzaddikim themselves hardly make a living. In other words, it is tzaddikim who bring all blessings into the world, either because their merit supports the world or because they inspire G-d's charity. People don't always have exactly what they deserve. The things we have don't necessarily come to us because we are worthy. What we have is because of the tzaddikim who keep the world running, even though the tzaddikim themselves sometimes have very little.