



# Minutes With Messiah

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## *Fear Casts Out Love*

What would happen if a Muslim moved next door to me? I would greet you warmly, and offer to help you move in. In the afternoon, my wife would bring some food over to your house and she also would welcome you into our neighborhood. After you were settled in to your new home we would probably see each other from time to time working in the yard or shoveling snow. ... What would we talk about? We would have to discuss the nature of God's revelation to man -- is the Bible God's final revelation to man or is the Koran? We both believe in the virgin birth of Christ, but how did He die? Was He really crucified for the sins of mankind? Did the Old Testament foretell the coming of the prophet Mohamed? Does the gospel of John refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit to the apostles or to the coming of the prophet Mohamed? These questions could be discussed in a public forum and would show to the world the Christians and Muslims can discuss their differences, maintain their convictions, exhibit tolerance and be friendly all at the same time! Let us not judge each other by extremists. (David Padfield, Lecture to Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, August 12, 2000)

In contrast to what Brother Padfield said then, we have a number of preachers who currently oppose any sort of immigration of refugees (or anyone) from Islamic countries. It doesn't matter that some of them are Christians. It only matters that some of them "might be terrorists." The world has changed in the past twenty years. (Note that those remarks came before the events of 9/11/01.) Twenty years ago the odds were that most Christians had never met a Muslim, but would have had no problem doing so. Today in America, the odds are that most Christians have never met a Muslim, but many would be afraid to do so.

"Perfect love casts out fear." (1 Jn 4:18) It seems the corollary is true as well; perfect fear casts out love. Refugees from Islamic countries are probably vetted more extensively than people requesting work or student visas from the same countries, yet Christian men and women are saying they don't want to help these people. This makes one wonder whether they might have the same attitude about an immigrant from India (predominantly Hindu or Buddhist), Japan (Shinto), or Europe (strongly

atheist). Would they be welcomed because there are no militant sects of those religions?

From Europe we hear stories about protests and violence perpetrated by Muslims. On the other hand, Eastern European Missions have been providing Bibles in Arabic and Farsi for refugees. Some of these people, when given a Bible and a welcome, when given food, shelter and basic necessities, have become Christians. When shown love, they have reacted with love.

God knew this tendency in people. Jewish law mandated equal treatment for immigrants and Israelites.

But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:34)

Christians are expected to do no less. "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." (Gal 6:10) Jesus had an even more specific command, even in the face of an invading and hostile army. His command even implies that failure to show love to Muslim refugees or others we may even fear might indicate that we are not God's children.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. (Matt 5:44-45)

Over the past twenty years we have indeed seen a change in the tactics of a few extremists. We have seen an increase in fear and in calls for American isolationism. We have seen changes in American Christianity. The world has changed; the Word has not.

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# A Look at Prayer

People have been praying from time immemorial. Ancient Egyptian texts include what might be considered prayers. There is a famous prayer from the reign of Akhenaten, the father (brother? both?) of Tutankhamen, approximately 100 years before Moses. Most of those early prayers consisted primarily of praise, although they may have included some petitions. The Jewish people, however, seem to have taken prayer to a new level, perhaps because of the more intimate relationship with God. To the ancient Egyptians, and in other countries, the gods were either remote or to be feared. Before the reign of Akhenaten, the sun god was taken out of his temple once a year and paraded through the streets. That might be the one time that any of the common people had any intercourse with this god. Some of the other gods, on the other hand, were part of daily life, and greatly to be feared. The god of the River could cause it to overflow its banks at the most inopportune times. Ammut, the crocodile-headed goddess, was the eater of souls if one was judged unworthy. Many of the gods were intimately associated with death or destruction. When the Israelites heard God speak to them at Sinai, this changed. They had actually heard God. He was involved in their lives, and they were involved in his plan.

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Christian prayer traces a direct line back to the Jewish way of prayer. Although the non-Jews soon outnumbered Jews in the numbers of believers, it was the Jewish tradition of prayer that won out over the Roman. If Christians want to understand what prayer is, and how to pray, they must go back to the Jewish models.

## Corporate prayer

Most of the time, Jewish prayer is corporate. That is, it is done as a group. Many of the prayers cannot be said unless there is a *minyan* (ten people qualified to participate in the prayers) present. Kind of like a meeting not being able to conduct business without a quorum present. This may date back to the Temple worship. King David set aside a specific group of the priests to sing prayers as their part of the Temple service. Many (most?)

of the Psalms are prayers to be sung in this way. After the destruction of Solomon’s Temple and the Babylonian captivity, these prayers became part of the new synagogue assembly.

Prayer was a way for the Jewish people to recognize not only their dependence on God, but also their dependence upon each other. By saying prayers together they affirm their own identity as a people. By saying specific prayers at specific times or on specific occasions, they affirm their unity, regardless of distance.

Christians also have a tradition of public prayer. Some Christian groups maintain the liturgical manner of prayer, while others could be said to pray “together but separate.” One person may be selected to say a prayer for the entire congregation. Usually these are phrased using “we” and “us,” although some personalize their public prayers. Even as a man “leads” a congregation in prayer, many individuals may elect to say their own prayers during this time. The congregation may be unified in prayer, or may not. Particularly as one person leads, everyone else is expected to maintain silence; this type of prayer does not have the same corporate existence as a shared oral prayer.

Lois Tverberg tells of reading from the Jewish liturgy, and later seeing the contrast with Christian manners.

All by myself I was praying these ancient lines that were exclusively framed in terms of “we” and “us” and “our people” (as is the Lord’s Prayer, of course). A few days later I attended a large Christian worship service. There the focus of every song was on God and *me*: “I love you, Lord, and I lift my voice” ... “Just as I am, without one plea” ... Hundreds of us were worshipping side by side, a sea of voices resounding together, and every one of us was pretending to be all alone. (Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*, p. 57)

Even the phrasing of most Jewish prayers is designed to maintain the group identity, even if prayed separately. Even if one is praying alone, it is “as if with the body.” The change from “we” to “me” that is characteristic of Christian prayer may reflect a change in attitude. God is no longer the God of the people, but is now a personal God. To a certain extent this is understandable, but in another sense it could be called unfortunate. A hallmark of Judaism has always been a sense of community. Perhaps this has been because of persecution. If Christianity has lost the sense of “church” rather than individuality, perhaps it is because of a lack of persecution. Almost three quarters of Paul’s letters were to churches, and some of those he even asked be shared.

Community, and community prayer, were so important that the greatest punishment Paul could conceive was for the congregation to shun the individual.

## Individual prayer

On the other hand, Jesus commended individual prayer. “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” (Matt 6:6) This was said in contrast to those who made loud, public, individual prayers, to discourage showiness. (Maybe some musicians should get the message, too.) It does show, however, that the Jewish people also have a tradition of personal prayer. In fact, the most important prayer (Grace After the Meal) is never said in synagogue, but at most in the presence of family.

Personal prayer is encouraged. While most Jewish prayers are prescribed, going “off script” is encouraged. After all, several people in the Bible are known for their personal prayers: Hannah, Jeremiah, Tevye. Well, that last isn’t from the Bible, but some of the best lines in *Fiddler On the Roof* are Tevye’s conversations with God. Even some Christians are a bit shocked by the way that some Jews talk to God. Jesus spoke familiarly with God. So did Abraham and Moses. Sometimes the familiarity borders on insolence. Abraham famously negotiated with God over the fate of Sodom. (His bargaining skills would be legendary in Juarez or Tijuana.) Moses more than once had to remind God that it would look bad on him if he destroyed Israel in the wilderness. Jeremiah notoriously questioned God’s reasons for his instructions. (Jer 32. See “How to Question God” in the May, 2002 issue of *Minutes With Messiah*.) These examples seem to stem from an understanding of the reasonableness of God. We think of God as loving, merciful, or vengeful, but rarely do we remember that his sovereignty does not negate reason.

## Berakhot

The best-known examples of Jewish prayer are *berakhot*, or blessings. In the aforementioned *Fiddler*, the rabbi is asked if there is a blessing for the hated Tsar. He answers, “Of course! May God bless and keep the Tsar...far away from us.” One of the more famous sections of the New Testament is the beatitudes, which all begin with “blessed.” The Hebrew word from which the descriptive term *berakhot* is derived also means “blessed.” Unlike the beatitudes, or even the blessing for the Tsar, most Jewish blessings have a specific format. Translated into English, they begin, “Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who gives/commands us ...” What follows depends on the purpose of the blessing. Those purposes are multivaried: before eating certain

foods, on seeing something new or beautiful, on waking, before sleeping, for holidays, for performing certain acts.

Some might wonder about the difference in blessings. The beatitudes, for instance, bless people: peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the persecuted. Most Jewish *berakhot* seem to be blessing God. How can we bestow a blessing on the Almighty? We can’t. But we can acknowledge the blessedness of the one who gives all blessings. Actually, there is little real difference between “blessed art thou, peacemakers,” and “blessed art thou, O Lord.” In both cases, blessed is an adjective describing the person, rather than a verb conferring a blessing. The peacemakers are already blessed, because they are called the children of God. God is already blessed, and because of that we acknowledge the blessings that he gives us. And there is a *berakhah* upon receiving bad news, because we acknowledge that God knows the final result, not just the apparent tragedy leading up to ultimate good.

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## Liturgical prayer

The Roman Catholics and some of those Reformation groups that have not gone far from them are quite familiar with liturgical prayer, as are the Jewish people. Some other Christian groups have a hard time with repeating a specific prayer at specific times. The “evangelicals” tend to think that prayer is a personal thing, and even as a group one does not pray by repeating a set of words. Jesus, on the other hand, seems to have followed the system his companions knew. “After this manner, pray.” (Matt 6:9) He then gives a specific prayer.

Whether Jews, Catholics, or Anglicans, those who use specific prayers in their liturgy emphasize the importance of focus. Prayer is not rote repetition without understanding. For that all you need is a prayer wheel. (And even among those who don’t use a liturgy, it is easy to lose focus during a public prayer.) Many Jews use motion (*davening*) to help maintain focus. To others, just the act of speaking out loud helps.

Ultimately, prayer is an acknowledgement of someone greater than ourselves. Whether corporate or personal, liturgical or spontaneous, prayer tells us that God is superior. That, in the end, is the difference that the Jewish people brought to prayer, and that they passed on to Christians.

# *Pull an All Nighter*

College students are quite familiar with pulling an all-nighter. It is finals week, and you haven't really studied up until now. You have three important finals in one day tomorrow. What do you do? You stay up all night cramming for those finals, knowing you will have to do the same tomorrow. The next day you get through your first and second finals, but fall asleep in the middle of the third. That is why college students have 30-cup coffee pots in their rooms. Well, it isn't just college students that end up studying all night. Many Jews do it, too.

The holiday of *Shavuos* (aka Pentecost, which starts the evening of May 30 in 2017) is unusual in several ways. First, it is the only one of the major festivals that does not fall on the full moon. In fact, if you follow the view of the Sadducees, it doesn't even fall on the same date every year. The Sadducees held that the start of the counting of fifty days began on the day after the first Sabbath after Passover. Thus the holiday would always fall on a Sunday, but since Passover might come on a Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, or Sabbath, the actual date would vary. The Pharisees (and modern Jews) held that the fifty day count always ends on Sivan 7, fifty days after Passover itself, which may be the evening of a Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or Sunday.

Another way that *Shavuos* is different is that it has no mandated way of celebrating the holiday. *Pesach* is celebrated by removing all leaven. *Sukkos* (the Feast of Booths) is celebrated by building temporary shelters and living in them, as well as by waving certain branches. On *Yom Kippur*, fasting is the order of the day. But the requirement for *Shavuos*, other than the animal sacrifice,

is—nothing. No feasting, no fasting, no special observance.

That doesn't mean that the Jewish people don't do anything to celebrate the holiday. It just means that any such celebration is rabbinic rather than mandated by the law itself.

The holiday is presumed to fall on the anniversary of the giving of the Law on Sinai. Scripture says they arrived at Sinai in "the third month" after leaving Egypt. (Ex 19:1) Since they left on the fifteenth day of one month, they might have come to Sinai anywhere from 46 to 75 days later. The law was given three days after they arrived at the mountain. The minimum time elapsed, then, would be 49 or 50 days. (Using the Sadducees calculation, *Shavuos* could have been as many as 57 days after Passover.)

Since the holiday is most closely associated with the giving of the Law, it only makes sense to celebrate the Law in some way on *Shavuos*. And that is where the all-nighter comes in. The traditional way to celebrate the holiday is to stay up all night, studying. The rabbis say this is putting oneself in the place of the original group of Israelites, and accepting the Law as they did.

This is not a bad idea, be ye Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or any other group that holds their scriptures to be divinely inspired. If the scriptures are indeed the word of God, should they not be read and studied regularly? Daily? Weekly? Annually? It is generally not considered a burden to fast one day a year (or daily for a month for Muslims). If it is possible to spend a day without feeding the body, how much easier should it be to spend a night feeding the soul?

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