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Thank you, Rabbi, for inviting me to participate in the Prayer Project. I especially appreciate the opportunity that it has given me to think about the structure of the Jewish liturgy, its origins, its development, and how it finally came to be settled in what we do today.

I want to talk today about an element of our service that is not quite prayer; I would call it “prayer-adjacent”. In our text it appears as the closing meditation to the Amidah, “Elohai N’tzor”. As a bit of background, though, I want to briefly outline what happens in our service so that we don’t lose sight of the context.

The Friday evening service has three basic parts: a call, a commitment, and prayer, all wrapped up in beginning and ending songs.

The first major part is Bar’chu – the call to worship. Unspoken is the counting of a minyan, as if to assemble a necessary quorum for a meeting, and the leader speaks words of praise, and we respond in kind, as if to say, yes, we are here, in the right frame of mind, and ready to begin. This has been our tradition forever; you can see its mark in the Roman Catholic mass, which also begins with a greeting of praise and response, and in the Muslim Call to Prayer, known as the Adhan.

The second major part is Shema, the commitment. It says, “We are one community, and here is our core value.” We remind ourselves of the core idea, reaffirm our acceptance of it and remind ourselves of a few of the ways in which we can remember it. Again, our Muslim cousins express a similar profession of faith in their very simple First Pillar of Islam, and our Christian cousins have adopted more complex creeds that have sown the bases of their schisms.

Today, though, I want to focus on the conclusion to the third major portion – the Amidah – and in particular what is absent from that portion. That concluding meditation is interesting in light of what is absent from the Amidah on Shabbat.

The full Amidah (Shemoneh Esrei) of 19 blessings has three major components: 3 blessings of Praise, 13 of Petition and 3 of Thanksgiving. As you can see, the Amidah for Shabbat omits entirely the thirteen petitional blessings in which we ask for something, and instead focuses on praise and thanksgiving, and while we do work in some petitions throughout the service – Misheberach, for example – we are mostly content to not ask for things for ourselves. In place of those petitions, we include Kedushat haYom, the Sanctity of the Day.

The blessings are organized as follows:

	Weekdays		Shabbat
1	Avot ("Ancestors"). <i>Praise</i> of God as the God of the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs.	Praise	Avot ("Ancestors"). <i>Praise</i> of God as the God of the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs.
2	Gevurot ("powers"). <i>Praise</i> of God for His power and might.		Gevurot ("powers"). <i>Praise</i> of God for His power and might.

3	Kedushat ha-Shem ("the sanctification of the Name"). <i>Praise</i> of God's holiness.		Kedushat ha-Shem ("the sanctification of the Name"). <i>Praise</i> of God's holiness.
4	Binah ("understanding"). <i>Petition</i> to God to grant wisdom and understanding.	Petition	4-16 replaced with Kedushat haYom ("sanctity of the day")
5	Teshuvah ("return", "repentance"). <i>Petition</i> to God to help Jews to return to a life based on the Torah.		
6	Selichah ("forgiveness"). <i>Petition</i> for forgiveness for all sins.		
7	Geulah ("redemption"). <i>Petition</i> for redemption from affliction.		
8	Refuah ("healing"). <i>Petition</i> for healing the sick.		
9	Birkat HaShanim ("blessing for years [of good]"). <i>Petition</i> for the produce of food.		
10	G'luyot ("diasporas"). <i>Petition</i> to bring the Jewish exiles back to the land of Israel.		
11	Birkat HaDin ("justice"). <i>Petition</i> to restore righteous judges.		
12	Birkat HaMinim ("the sectarians, heretics"). <i>Petition</i> to destroy the enemies of the Jewish people.		
13	Tzadikim ("righteous"). <i>Petition</i> for mercy toward and support of the righteous.		
14	Bo'ne Yerushalayim ("Builder of Jerusalem"). <i>Petition</i> to rebuild Jerusalem and to restore the Kingdom of David.		
15	Birkat David ("Blessing of David"). <i>Petition</i> to bring the descendant of King David, who will be the messiah. (This is the 19th of the 18 blessings of Shmoneh esrai)		
16	Tefillah ("prayer"). <i>Petition</i> to accept our prayers, to have mercy and be		

	compassionate.		
17	Avodah ("service"). <i>Thanksgiving</i> /petition for accepting the this substitute for the Temple service.	Thanksgiving	Avodah ("service"). Thanksgiving/petition for accepting the this substitute for the Temple service.
18	Hoda'ah ("grateful acknowledgment"). <i>Thanksgiving</i> for protection and support.		Hoda'ah ("grateful acknowledgment"). Thanksgiving for protection and support.
19	Sim Shalom ("Grant Peace"). The priestly blessing, for peace, goodness, kindness and compassion.		Sim Shalom ("Grant Peace"). The priestly blessing, for peace, goodness, kindness and compassion.

Having now completely eliminated petitions, we close with a meditation that sounds very much like a petition. Why?

There is a section in Talmud Berakhot (16b-17a) in which are recounted the practices of 10 different rabbis in concluding the Shemoneh Esrei. Each of those practices is particularly introspective; they focus on what is particularly important to that rabbi. You might think of it as a personal summing up. And you, of course, are free to add your own, because it is a personal meditation. The one that has been cemented into the liturgy, though, is Elohai N'tzor,

“Eternal one, guard my lips from evil and my lips from speaking deceit. To those who insult me, may my soul be silent.”

At the conclusion of the English translation in your siddur there is a reference to Psalm 34:15, where David says those words “Guard your tongue from evil.” And the event to which David refers here is an incident in which David is on the run. He is in a very difficult position: he started out as the trusted emissary of the evil King Saul; he was successful in battle; he became so successful that Saul took David as a son-in-law, and David became so popular that the Israelites wanted him as king. Saul viewed David as a threat and sent his own son Jonathan to kill David, but Jonathan warned David. And so David escaped alone, in the enemy territory of Gath. And now, cornered, King Achish he is cornered, just like Matt Damon in the Jason Bourne movies! The people are saying “That’s David! That’s the guy!” And so what does he do? He shuts up. More particularly, he pretends to be insane and says nothing. And King Achish says, “This is just another lunatic. I’ve got dozens of lunatics already.” So by not saying anything at all, David escaped.

Why might a story like that be in the mind of a fourth-century Babylonian rabbi, named Mar bar Ravina, about whom we know two important things: he attended two very depressing weddings. The first was his own, where the guests ask one of the rabbis to sing, and the song he picks is “Alas for us that we are to die”. The second was his son’s wedding, son’s wedding, when his guests were having a great time, he is reported to have smashed a cup onto the floor to dampen the crowd’s spirits. I imagine that Mrs. bar Ravina had something to say at the end of each of those evenings, to the effect of “You really should think before you go and say something or do something stupid.”

“Guard my lips from evil and to those who insult me, may my soul be silent”. This is not something that God does for you. It’s not really a petition, but a reminder to oneself. When I

forget to do that, that's usually when get into the most trouble; I try to keep in my mind the voice of my bride who reminds me that I really ought to think before I go and say something stupid. In reflecting on the mistakes made during the past week and the improvements to be made for the coming week, the best first step is to remember to think before you speak. It was good advice in the 4th century and it remains good advice today.

Shabbat shalom.