



## The Intuitive Prayer Book Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder

**Subject Area:** Prayer, Torah/Talmud, values, Jewish living and identity

**Multi-unit lesson plan**

**Target Age:** 4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> grade

**Objectives:** To help children understand prayer as very relevant to contemporary and personal life by connecting individual prayers of the *amidah* to issues that they are faced with in their daily lives. This will be done by facilitating each student's creation of a prayer book that captures the essence of what prayer is and avoids the unnecessary obstacle of the need to read Hebrew, or even English.

So much attention is paid to ensuring that our children know the text and melodies of the traditional prayers. But in many ways the essence of prayer has been lost – prayer is the ‘work of the heart’, not of the mind or of memory functioning. It is my goal, then, to create a prayer experience for children aged 6-9 by helping them create their own prayer book.

This will not be free-form, however, and for good reason: the traditional 19-part prayer (the *amidah* or *Shmoneh Esrei*) is designed to take the worshipper through the 19 emotions or considerations that are most appropriate and necessary on a daily basis. It is, after all, essential that we consider those who are sick or indigent in our prayers, but we might not remember to do so if we were given the opportunity to pray free-form for five minutes. This basic structure, or what is called ‘*matbeah tefillah*’ should not be discarded. But forced adherence to the words can be detrimental and make prayer into an exercise in memorization or robotic recitation rather than a heartfelt experience.

This lesson plan will focus on what are called ‘the middle 13 blessings’, which are forms of request, as opposed to the first three that focus on praise and the last three that focus on thanksgiving. (These are slightly more abstract, but they may also be included by a creative teach.) The process is simple in execution but will require appropriate facilitation in order to be effective. It looks like this:

Each lesson begins with a discussion. For example, the first pertains to knowledge. What knowledge does the world need? What knowledge does your family need? What knowledge

do you need? The discussion might be focused toward science and the cure of diseases like cancer, the origins of the earth, and solutions to problems of environment. It might be directed toward knowing how to get along with each other, what to say in certain situations, or how to make good choices.

Students are then encouraged to boil the results of the discussion down to a small handful of words or images that will remind them of the results of the discussion, and those words and images can be written or drawn or cut out of magazines (stock pictures would be provided) and attached to an otherwise blank piece of paper containing the words ‘Baruch Ata Adonai, Chonen Ha’da’at’. It is explained to them that 1) they know the first three words, and 2) the last two words mean ‘Who gives knowledge’. They are directed toward expressing the sentiments of those pictures as a prayer: ‘Please help us find a cure for cancer.’ ‘Please help me figure out how to deal with my annoying brother’, etc. Page one is complete. Each child’s page should be put in a clear insert-page that can be written on with dry-erase marker, and put in a three ring binder. The writeable page is important, as will be explained later.

Subsequent pages will follow this general form, on the following topics: 2) love of Torah and service of G-d 3) forgiveness 4) saving people from bad situations 5) healing 6) rain and material well-being 7) returning to the land of Israel 8) fair, just leadership, 9) how we deal with enemies 10) asking Hashem to take care of people we love 11) Jerusalem 12) the Messiah and 13) prayer itself. The Hebrew words on the page will be taken from the end (the *chatima*) of the pertinent prayer in the traditional prayer book.

Though this is presented as 13 lessons, some could be confined as necessary. I personally believe that this is worth a semester of work, and should be kept independently.

Sample lesson – lesson #1

Preparation of materials: a stack of science magazines, science section of a newspaper, picture of people who are sick, pictures representing global warming, laboratories – several or many copies of each may be necessary. Also, samples of text books, math books, puzzles, maybe even pages in foreign languages.

Preparation of discussion: facilitator starts with a question: how important are our brains? What effects do our minds have on others? Are there important thinkers in the world? Are there things that we need certain people to figure out? Are there things you need help figuring out? **Discussion.**

Then, the explanation: this is the prayer when we ask Hashem to send the world more brain-power. **Discussion.**

Cutting, pasting. The facilitator is walking around observing, asking questions, making sure they are properly understanding. If possible or necessary, have the students talk to each other about.

**Presentation:** Each child should describe the one image they most resonate with and explain why. I particularly like the process where the kid says, for example, 'I hope Hashem will help scientists find a cure for cancer, because my Aunt Sally is sick,' and then all the kids yell out 'Hashem! So-and-so wants you to help scientists find a cure for cancer because his Aunt Sally is sick.'

**Lesson 2** would begin with discussion of why learning Torah and Mitzvot are important, and might include the importance of doing good things, like feeding the poor or visiting the sick.

**Question:** What does Hashem want from us? As individuals, as a class, as a community, as the Jewish people, as the human race: And are we doing it? Why not? What is getting in the way?

**Lesson 3** would revolve around the need to ask for forgiveness and times we've been hurt and wanted someone else to ask us for forgiveness. It might emphasize the need to have good, solid relationships and friendships. The page might contain the words 'sorry', 'I apologize' and the like.

**Questions:** Have you done anything that you regret? How about the entire human race? How does forgiveness feel? Are you forgiving? What grudge are you holding onto?

**Lesson 4** would revolve around people in poverty, in prison, in danger, and asking Hashem to save them. Any National Geographic would have plenty of pictures of this theme.

Questions would revolve around different kinds of need and poverty.

**Lesson 5** would feature discussion of people who need healing, physically as well as mentally.

**Lesson 6** would include discussion of places in the world that suffer from drought or flooding. It would also include poverty-stricken people. It is also honest for kids to include things they want, like an iPod, even if it seems materialistic. The point of this project is not to moralize, but to help kids understand prayer as a way to communicate basic needs.

**Lesson 7** would revolve around world Jewish communities and might include information on project Magic Carpet that brought Jews out of Ethiopia. It could also include discussion of how Jews suffered in Soviet Russia, and how there are still Jews who would really want to move to Israel.

**Questions:** why is it important that Jews be in Israel? Why is community important? How does community help individuals?

**Lesson 8** pertains to leadership. It would include discussions of important leaders and how they affected the Jewish people, whether they be Moses or Theodore Herzl. Have pictures of bad leaders, too, so people know the difference.

Questions: What do good leaders do? What do bad leaders do? How are rules and laws important to a society?

**Lesson 9** pertains to war and enemies. It may be an appropriate time, depending on age and maturity, to lightly discuss the Holocaust and other bad moments in Jewish history. A light review of recent Israeli wars could serve to make the kids aware that the situation is still somewhat dire.

Questions would revolve around when war is necessary and when it is not.

**Lesson 10** pertains to people we want Hashem to take care of. This could include family, friends, and others. Bringing a camera to the previous class could be useful in terms of providing kids with pictures of their friends.

Questions: How does/can Hashem help?

**Lesson 11** revolves around Jerusalem. Discussion should feature a presentation on why Jerusalem is so important to us, complete, with pictures of the wall, drawings of the Holy Temple, and the like. It could also feature discussion of the promise in Isaiah ‘My House will be a House of Prayer for all nations.’

Questions revolve around the importance of Jerusalem for the Jews and for the world.

**Lesson 12** is about the Messiah. A review of the lives of King David and King Solomon might provide clues for the kids as to what that may have looked like, and they should be encouraged to come up with words and phrases that describe the perfect world – peace, beauty, etc.

Questions revolve around what the perfect world would look like.

**Lesson 13** is about our prayers being heard. This is perhaps the most abstract, though I often think of a big ear coming out of the sky. Kids come up with amazing things.

Questions: How does prayer work? What kind of things is it OK to pray for/ What is it not OK to pray for?

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The translucent page is important because it will allow kids to jot down notes before they pray on a day-to-day basis. Before prayer each day, the pages should be gone through pen in hand, allowing them to note a current issue that is of concern to them. This may revolve around current events, a classmate who is sick, or something they have learned about in history class. This note can be erased or replaced appropriately.

If time does not permit a revisiting of each page each day, the teacher might choose one page

to emphasize each day on a rotating basis.

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If done properly, the students will see prayer as a useful tool for expression themselves. They will see it as relevant to the issues that they face on a regular basis, not as some far-off sacrament that they do to satisfy a far-off god. This will only deepen their experience of the words and songs that they are taught throughout Hebrew school.