



LEARNING FRIENDSHIP FROM THE AMIDAH

Submitted by: *Yehudis Fishman*

Subject Area: Prayer

Target Age Group: Ages 7 and up

Lesson Objective: Linking Ethical Behavior with Spiritual Values

Abstract:

All day schools and many Hebrew schools teach the Amidah, whether for personal growth or for participation in congregational services.

All Jewish schools would like to help children learn good Midot (character traits) and develop positive ways of relating to others. All too often we hear too many tragic stories connected with interpersonal problems in schools, even in the younger, more innocent grades. Often, teasing and bullying are the norm rather than the exception.

Next to their immediate families, children spend most of their time in the company of peers, whom they may- or may not- be fortunate enough to get along with. Wouldn't it be wonderful if these two priorities of prayer and character development could be combined and integrated!

We have many Biblical and Rabbinic precedents of this integration. Here are a few examples: The Ten Commandments were given on two separate tablets. The Midrash points out that it is no accident that the first set of tablets represent the commandments between man and G-d, while the second set focus on interpersonal laws. One sage points out that if we line up the two tablets side by side, each side illuminates the other. For example, 'I am the L-rd your G-d' corresponds to 'You shall not murder. This alignment teaches us that to kill a person is similar to destroying the divine image.

Another quote from the Torah is: 'You shall walk in His ways.' Again, the rabbis explain, 'Just as He is gracious, so should you be...just as He is compassionate, so should you be to others. Finally, there is a teaching from the Baal Shem Tov on the verse in Psalms: 'G-d is your shadow.' This implies, says the Rebbe, that just as you behave toward others, so G-d behaves toward you.



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The same kinds of connections can be made with all of the eighteen blessings of the Amidah. For each blessing, after learning the blessing itself, the teacher- or the students- could come up with an interpersonal parallel. For example, the first blessing ends with the words, 'the shield, or protector, of Abraham.' The teacher could first go into the prayer in depth, or if time and age is not conducive to in-depth study of the blessing, convey a general sense of the meaning of the blessing, and how Hashem protected Avraham and us.

After the blessing itself is grasped, the teacher could initiate a discussion of what it means to be a shield or protector of one's friend, including perhaps of what the opposite would look like. Alternatively, the teacher could present a scenario of someone in trouble, and different possible responses of other children, and which response would most resemble 'being a shield' to the one in trouble.

After learning and discussing the meaning and applications of the Amidah, the students could review the blessings by performing their own skits, either individually or in pairs, and having the rest of the class try to identify which blessing the skit referred to. Pictures or paintings could also be made which reflect the blessings and their interpersonal connections.

There are many benefits that can accrue from learning the Amidah in this manner:

- 1) Much of Jewish society tends to isolate ritual behavior from ethics. This integrated approach could help bridge this gap.
- 2) This is also a consciousness raising activity, in the sense that it conveys an awareness that many ordinary, daily activities can be opportunities for 'an encounter with the Divine,' and have effects and consequences on many levels of existence.
- 3) There is a Torah approach to everything we do from action to speech and even to thought.



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The complete lesson plan would include a sample of how each of the eighteen blessings could be used to contribute to the goal of 'being a good friend.'

Here is the full description:

The weekday amidah consists of 18 blessings, which is why it is also called 'Shemoneh Esrei,' meaning 18. Actually there was a 19th blessing that was included later, but the original name still remained. The first three and the last three blessings are the constants, which remain in the daily prayers, whether on a weekday or festival. The first three fall under the category of 'praise' while the last three are prayers of thanksgiving. The middle thirteen are requests for both material and spiritual needs. They are recited only during the weekday when it is more appropriate than a holiday to pray for these needs.

I will now refer to the ending blessing of each of the 19 weekday amidah blessings. A complete text of all 19 is attached as a separate document.

1. MAGEN AVRAHAM -THE SHIELD OF ABRAHAM.

First we would discuss what it means that G-d was a shield of Abraham, and how He is our shield. Then we would discuss what it means to be a shield to our friends, and under what circumstances we could be a shield. When someone needs protection, what are some inappropriate ways to respond? In general, when we can compare positive and negative responses, we can give children a sense of the fundamental principle in Judaism: 'That which is hated by you, do not do to your friend.'

2. MECHAYE HAMEITIM - REVIVER OF THE DEAD

Here we need to look at all the related associations of revival in this blessing, such as, 'supporting the fallen' and 'healing the sick.' There is a process of entropy in the world, where the weak are left to suffer, but the Torah's perspective is that Hashem, and by extension here, a friend, needs to champion the cause of the underdog (as opposed to living by- 'it's a dog eat dog world.')

Here would be good to tell the story of King David and his arch-enemy, the



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jealous Doeg, who persecuted David at every opportunity. At one point, David chides Doeg that it takes more might to lift someone up than it does to push them down. Thus a good- and strong- friend, is one who engages in the act of uplifting one's friend, in whatever way is needed.

3. HA'E-L HAKADOSH - THE HOLY G-D.

Holiness is a non-sensory quality. However you chose to define and explain the word holy, I think the relevant human association is the idea that what is most valuable about a friend is non-material. Discuss qualities of friendship that can be felt rather than seen by the visible eye, such as loyalty, honesty, kindness, patience.

4. CHONEN HADA'AT - THE BESTOWER OF KNOWLEDGE.

How well do you know your friend? If you don't know him/her very well, you make think you're doing something good, when really it may be harmful. For example, if you bring your friend flowers, but he/she doesn't like them or is allergic to them, that is not being a very good friend. There may always be something you don't know about your friend, but there are ways to find out. Discuss some of these ways, such as careful observation, asking questions, and modeling how you let your friend find out about you.

5. HA'ROTZEH B'TSHUVA - THE ONE WHO DESIRES RETURN.

Inevitably, things happen that cause friendship to weaken. Discuss how you can re-connect to a friend when you have grown apart. If the distance is due to physical separation, sending cards or letters, or using email or phone calls are all possibilities. If you are close by, but have found that you and your friend have been drifting apart due to distractions or separate interests, you may need to decide if the friendship is valuable enough to invest ongoing time and energy, rather than just a temporary reconnection. Sometimes friends are very disappointed when there seems to be a reconnection which is soon dropped, either intentionally or unintentionally.



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6. CHANUN HAMARBEH LISLOACH - THE GRACIOUS ONE WHO FORGIVES ABUNDANTLY.

Friendship frequently means apologizing or being willing to accept apologies. Do you or your friend have trouble with either? Discuss how you might overcome that difficulty. If someone hurt you or your feelings several times, would you still accept his/her apology? Under what conditions would you not? Do you know what the Torah says about the three steps on how to apologize? Which step is hardest for you? If someone else got blamed for something you did, would you be able to admit your guilt? If you got blamed for something you didn't do, how would you handle it?

7. GO'EL YISRAEL - REDEEMER OF ISRAEL.

To be redeemed from a Torah point of view, means not only to be saved from a particular difficulty, but also to see how that difficulty was really a blessing in disguise. Can you think of examples of how you could show someone this principle, or how someone has pointed this out to you, and thereby made you more able to cope with the trouble? Can you figure out a general pattern in what makes troubles turn in to good things? Some wise people say it is about waiting long enough to see the big picture. Some rabbis say that's one of the things the Torah means when Moshe asked G-d why the righteous suffer and G-d answered, 'No man can see My Face and live, but you can see my Back.' How do you feel about this answer?

8. ROFEI CHOLEI AMO YISRAEL - WHO HEALS THE SICK OF HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL.

Even if you are not a doctor, there are ways you can make sick friends feel better. Discuss some of these, such as visiting them, sending cards, bringing gifts, making them laugh, and helping with homework. Can you think of anything else?

9. MEVORECH HASHANIM- WHO BLESSES THE YEARS.

This blessing is about providing someone with what they need, be it material or spiritual. How have you and your friends done this for each other? Do you



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appreciate it more when your friend buys you something or gives you something homemade? Do you value the time they spend with you as much as a gift? Are you grateful for their presence as much as for presents?

10. MEKABETZ NIDCHEI AMO YISRAEL - WHO GATHERS THE EXILES OF HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL.

This blessing is about finding and appreciating things in common. What is it that brings you and your friend together, both in shared activities and in similar ways of acting and thinking? Can you express this common bond with your friend? How does it feel when someone expresses this to you?

11. MELECH OHEV TZEDAKAH U'MISHPAT - THE KING WHO LOVES RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUSTICE.

Do you and your friend stand up for each other? Do you feel confident enough to show your friend when he/she is not being fair, either to you or to someone else? How do you feel when your friend points out something in you that needs correcting? Do you try to defend yourself right away, or do you think about it, or even feel grateful that your friend told you something that can help you become a better person?

12. SHOVER OYVIM U'MACHNIAH ZEDIM - WHO BREAKS THE ENEMIES AND SUBDUES THE ARROGANT.

There may be experiences, and even people, who try to come between you and your friend. Are you aware of them, and can you find ways to protect yourself and your friendship, if it is valuable to you? Are there voices inside you that may make you feel envious or greedy or over competitive with your friend in a way that can jeopardize your friendship? If so, what can you do about them?

13. MISH'AN U'MIVTACH LA'TZADIKIM - THE SUPPORT AND TRUST OF THE RIGHTEOUS.

This blessing is about being happy, rather than jealous about the success and achievements of your friend. A relevant story is when G-d tells Moshe that when



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Aaron, his older brother, will find out that Moshe has been appointed as the redeemer, Aaron will rejoice in his heart, and not be upset. Why wasn't Aaron jealous? What could he have told himself to help him not only not be jealous, but rejoice over his brother's selection. Some thoughts might be: 'He's part of my family, so his happiness is my happiness.' Or, 'If G-d picked Moshe, he's probably the best person for that job.' Can you think of any other inner messages to yourself about this issue?

14. BONEI YERUSHALAYIM - BUILDER OF JERUSALEM

In this blessing we create with our friend, a sacred space for the Divine Presence. We do this by our willingness to extend ourselves for our friend above and beyond the call of duty. An outstanding model of this is the famous story of the two brothers who lived on different sides of a mountain. One was single and the other had a large family. They both felt that in their old age, each brother would need more grain than the other to sustain them, so they both secretly transported their own grain to the other side. One day they happened to meet and they passionately embraced each other when they realized what happened. According to tradition, G-d chose that mountain as the site of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Discuss what you have done or could do for your friend even at great sacrifice of your time, energy, money, etc. and how that could make a huge difference in the other person's life.

15. MATZMIACH KEREN YESHUAH- WHO GROWS THE HORN OF SALVATION.

An important aspect of Mashiach consciousness, the Messianic era, is to repair the world around you. What can you and your friend, with each other's encouragement and inspiration do for the betterment and Tikun of the world? Are there things you could tell each other? Are there projects you could work on together that would be more successful than if you each worked on a project by yourself? Why might they be more successful?



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16. SHOME'AH TEFILLAH - WHO LISTENS TO PRAYER

G-d listens to our prayers and deepest wishes even if they are unspoken. Do you know your friend well enough to anticipate his/her needs and desires just by their non-verbal language? How can you be more sensitive to this? Perhaps by paying more attention to your own inner feelings, and the actions or attitudes that convey them, even before you can put them into words.

17. HA'MACHAZIR SHECHINATO L'TZION - WHO RESTORES HIS PRESENCE TO ZION.

True friendship extends above and beyond any particular qualities, to a longing and appreciation of your friend's presence in your life. Who are the people that you feel this appreciation for when they are with you, and longing for them when they are not. Can you express these feelings to them? Can you express these feelings to yourself?

18. HATOV SHIMCHA U'LECHA NA'EH L'HODOT - YOUR NAME IS GOOD AND TO YOU IT IS FITTING TO THANK.

Many of our prayers to G-d are filled with details of the ways we are grateful to G-d and for all the benefits we have from our relationship with Him. People like to feel appreciated, not just in general but for the details of why we like and admire them. It helps them feel inspired and brings out the best in them. Are you sensitive and articulate about exactly what are the reasons you like your friend so much? Think about how it makes you feel when your friend thanks and praises you for something specific.

19. HA'MEVARECH ET AMO YISRAEL BA'SHALOM - WHO BLESSES HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL WITH PEACE.

In every friendship there arises times and situations of arguments, disagreements, and misunderstandings. Do you have strategies for overcoming them? Friendship is not about either extreme of totally controlling or totally giving



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in, when a disagreement arises. It is rather about finding win-win solutions that will make it possible for both of you not only to bring harmony and peace to your relationship, but to help each other grow to become the best people you can be, for yourselves, each other, the world around you, and ultimately in the eyes of your creator.

When the Torah says, 'Love your friend as yourself,' the verse continues, 'I am the L-rd your G-d.' The connection between the two parts of the verse suggest that when you and your friend constantly work to improve your relationship, G-d too, so to speak wants to be part of that friendship circle.

Please click on the link below for further references to this lesson:

<http://www.hanefesh.com/edu/Read%20the%20Amidah%20-%20Printable%20Version.pdf>