Quest for God

Studies in Prayer and Symbolism

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sense of God's majesty and glory. In praising Him all that is specious, all that is false, is dispelled. We rise to a higher level of living.

For to Thee
Lord our God
God of our fathers,
are due
songs and praise,
hymn and psalm,
power and dominion,
victory,
grandeur, might,
homage, beauty,
holiness, kingship,
blessings, thanksgiving.
(The daily liturgy)

Our worship is humble; our superlatives are understatements.

The Polarity of Prayer

There is a specific difficulty of Jewish prayer. There are laws: how to pray, when to pray, what to pray. There are fixed times, fixed ways, fixed texts. On the other hand, prayer is worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of kavvanah (inner devotion). Thus, Jewish prayer is guided by two opposite principles: order and outburst, regularity and spontaneity, uniformity and individuality, law and freedom, a duty and a prerogative, empathy and self-expression, insight and sensitivity, creed and faith, the word and that which is beyond words. These principles are the two poles about which Jewish prayer revolves. Since each of the two moves in the opposite direction, equilibrium can only be maintained if both are of equal force. However, the pole of regularity usually proves to be stronger than the pole of spontaneity, and, as a result, there is a perpetual danger of prayer becoming a mere habit, a mechanical performance, an exercise in repetitiousness. The fixed pattern and regularity of our services tends to stifle the spontaneity of devotion. Our great problem, therefore, is how not to let the principle of regularity impair the power of spontaneity (kavvanah). It is a problem that concerns not only prayer but the whole sphere of Jewish observance. He who is not aware of this central difficulty is a simpleton; he who offers a simple solution is a quack.

It is a problem of universal significance. Polarity is an essential trait of all things in reality, and in Jewish faith the relationship between halacha (law) and agada (inwardness) is one of polarity. Taken abstractly they seem to be mutually exclusive, yet in actual living they involve each other. Jewish tradition maintains that there is no halacha without agada and no agada without halacha; that we must neither disparage the body nor sacrifice the spirit. The body is the discipline, the pattern, the law; the spirit is the inner devotion, spontaneity, freedom. The body without the spirit is a corpse; the spirit without the body is a ghost.

And yet the polarity exists and is a source of constant anxiety.

22According to Rabbi Yose, "He who alters the form of benedictions fixed by the wise has failed to fulfil his obligations" (Bekhochos 40a; Yerushalmi Bekhochos VI, 2, 10b). Rabbi Meir declares it to be the duty of everyone to say one hundred benedictions daily (Menochot 4a, see Numbers Rabbi, XVIII).

23Significantly, prayers written in our time are essentially petitional. Prayers of praise often sound like self-praise.

24See above, p. 37.
and occasional tension. How are we to maintain the reciprocity of tradition and freedom; how to retain both keva and kavanah, regularity and spontaneity, without upsetting the one or stilling the other?

At first sight, the relationship between halacha and agada in prayer appears to be simple. Tradition gives us the text, we create the kavanah. The text is given once and for all, the inner devotion comes into being every time anew. The text is the property of all ages, kavanah is the creation of a single moment. The text belongs to all men, kavanah is the private concern of every individual. And yet, the problem is far from being simple. The text comes out of a book, it is given; kavanah must come out of the heart. But is the heart always ready-three times a day—to bring forth devotion? And if it is, is its devotion in tune with what the text proclaims?

The Primacy of Inwardness

In regard to most aspects of observance, Jewish tradition has for pedagogic reasons given primacy to the principle of keva; there are many rituals concerning which the law maintains that if a person has performed them without proper kavanah, he is to be regarded ex post facto as having fulfilled his duty. In prayer, however, halacha insists upon the primacy of inwardness, of kavanah over the external performance, at least, theoretically. Thus, Maimonides declares: “Prayer without kavanah is no prayer at all. He who has prayed without kavanah ought to pray once more. He whose thoughts are wandering or occupied with other things need not pray until he has recovered his mental composure. Hence, on returning from a journey, or if one is weary or distressed, it is forbidden to pray until his mind is composed. The sages said that upon returning from a journey, one should

wait three days until he is rested and his mind is calm, then he prays.”

Prayer is not a service of the lips; it is worship of the heart. “Words are the body, thought is the soul, of prayer.” If one’s mind is occupied with alien thoughts, while the tongue moves on, then such prayer is like a body without a soul, like a shell without a kernel. Such a person may be compared to a servant whose master returned home. The servant urged his wife and the members of his family to show honor to the master and provide for all his needs, while he himself went out to loiter in the marketplace.

Significantly, Nahmanides, in contrast to other authorities, insists that prayer is not a duty, but a prerogative, and he who prays does not perform a requirement of the law. It is not the law of God that commands us to pray; it is the love and “grace of the Creator, blessed be He, to hear and to answer whenever we call upon Him.”

In reality, however, the element of regularity has often gained the upper hand over the element of spontaneity. Prayer has become lip service, an obligation to be discharged, something to get over with. “This people draw near, with their mouth and with their lips do honor Me, but have removed their heart far from Me and their fear of Me is a commandment of Me learned by rote.”

The primacy of inwardness in prayer may be explained by a parable. There was once a king who commanded his servants to make him savory food such as he loved. So they brought him the dish and he ate. And even though the preparation of the dish required many different kinds of work such as cutting wood, drawing water, slaughtering animals, kindling fire, cleaning pots and pans, and cooking, nevertheless the king only commanded them concern the savory food. And if it would have been possible to have produced the morsel without these steps, his

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27Mishnah Torah, Tefillah, 4, 6.
22Nahmanides, "Notes on Maimonides' Sefer Hamitzoth, mitzvah 5.
29Isaiah 29:13.
commandment would still have been considered fulfilled. For the king was not interested in the wood or the water and he was not concerned with the way the food is made.

Now imagine what would happen if, when the time to eat arrived, the servants were to come in carrying pots and pans. And when the king asked, “What are these?” they were to say to him: “You have told us to make savory food for you. Here, sir, is the equipment with which they are made.” Indeed would not the king burn with anger and would he not rightly say to them: “I commanded you only to bring me savory food. Did I ask you for pots and pans?”

And so it is with words of prayer when the heart is absent. Prayer becomes trivial when ceasing to be an act in the soul. The essence of prayer is *agada*, inwardness. Yet it would be a tragic failure not to appreciate what the spirit of halacha does for it, raising it from the level of an individual act to that of an eternal intercourse between the people Israel and God; from the level of an occasional experience to that of a permanent covenant. It is through halacha that we belong to God not occasion-ally, interminently, but essentially, continually. Regularity of prayer is an expression of my belonging to an order, to the covenant between God and Israel, which remains valid regardless of whether I am conscious of it or not.

How grateful I am to God that there is a duty to worship, a law to remind my distraught mind that it is time to think of God, time to disregard my ego for at least a moment! It is such happiness to belong to an order of the divine will. I am not always in a mood to pray. I do not always have the vision and the strength to say a word in the presence of God. But when I am weak, it is the law that gives me strength; when my vision is dim, it is duty that gives me insight.

We must not think, that kavanah is a small matter. It requires constant effort, and we may fail more often than we succeed. But the battle for kavanah must go on, if we are not to die of spiritual paralysis.

To offer an example: In order to prevent the practice of repeating a prayer for superstitious or magical purposes, the Talmud ordains that a person who says the word “Hear” (O Israel) or the word “We thank Thee” twice, is to be silenced. Rab Pappa asked Abbai: But perhaps the person repeated his prayer because when he said the words the first time he did not have kavanah. So he repeated the prayer in order to say it with kavanah. Thus, there was no ground for suspecting him of indulging in superstition or magical practices. Why should we silence him? Answered Abbai: “Has anyone intimacy with heaven?” Has anyone the right to address God thoughtlessly as one talks to a familiar friend? “If he did not at first direct his mind to prayer, we smite him with a smith’s hammer until he does direct his mind.”

Prayer is not for the sake of something else. *We pray in order to pray.* It is the queen of all commandments. No religious act is performed in which prayer is not present. No other mitzvah (commandment; a sacred act) enters our lives as frequently, as steadily, as the majesty of prayer.

The first tractate of the Talmud, the first section of Maimonides’ Code as well as Caro’s code, deal with prayer. We are told that “prayer is greater than good deeds,” “more precious than . . . sacrifices.” To Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher, the spiritual sphere that prayer can reach is higher than the sphere out of which inspiration of the prophets flows.

The philosophy of Jewish living is essentially a philosophy of worship. For what is observance, if not a form of worshiping God?

What is a mitzvah, a sacred act? *A Prayer in the form of a deed.*

This is the way of finding out whether we serve God, or an idea of God—through prayer. It is the test of all we are doing. What is the difference between Torah and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*? If an idea we have clarified, a concept we have

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51Rabbi Menahem Lonzano, *Derech Hayim*, Lemberg, 1931, p. 84.
52See p. 97.
53Berachoth 33b-34a.
54Berachoth 32a.
55Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, on Deuteronomy 11:12.
evolved, turns into a prayer, it is Torah. If it proves to be an aid to praying with greater kavanah, it is Torah; otherwise it is Wissenschaft. Prayer is of no importance unless it is of supreme importance. It is one of the things which "stand on the summit of the world," transcending the world and ascending to God, "and which men treat lightly."*36

"The hour of worship is both the core and the mature fruit of one’s time, while all other hours are like the channels leading to it . . . they stand in the same relation to the soul as food to the body. Prayer is to the soul what nourishment is to the body, and the blessing one derives from prayer lasts until it is time to pray again, just as the strength derived from the midday meal lasts till the evening meal."*37

Prayer Is Sacrifice

Prayer is more than meditation, and reading the prayers involves more than reproducing vocally, while following their symbols with the eyes, the words of the liturgy. A third-century scholar avers that it is improper to call upon the person who acts as the reader of prayers for the congregation by saying, Come and pray; we must rather use the words, Come, karev. Since the Hebrew word karev has four meanings, the invitation extended to him signifies the four tasks which a reader has to fulfill. Karev means

—offer our sacrifices!
—satisfy our needs!
—wage our battles!
—bring us close to Him.*38

The statement that since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, prayer has taken the place of sacrifice, does not imply that sacrifice was abolished when the sacrificial cult went out of existence. Prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice. Prayer is sacrifice. What has changed is the substance of sacrifice: the self took the place of the thing. The spirit is the same.

"Accept the offerings of praise, O Lord," says the Psalmist (119:108). "Let my prayer be counted as incense before Thee, and the lifting of my hands as an evening sacrifice" (141:2). In moments of prayer we try to surrender our vanities, to burn our insolence, to abandon bias, cant, envy. We lay all our forces before him. The word is but an altar. We do not sacrifice. We are the sacrifice.

During the act of prayer, one must "place himself among those who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the sanctification of God's Name, by reciting with proper devotion the confession of unity, Hear, O Israel. Then he must make himself poor, when he knocks at the door of the highest heights by saying the prayer, True and certain, and proceed thus to the Amidah (the silent prayer), so that he, in saying it, should feel himself broken-hearted, poor, needy. Then he should place himself among the saints by recounting his sins in the prayer Hearkening to prayer. So he should do in order to cling to the right hand ["of God"] which is stretched forth to receive sinners who repent."*38

To the saints, prayer is a hazard, a venture full of peril. Every person who prays is a priest at the greatest of all temples. The whole universe is the temple. With good prayer he may purify it, with improper prayer he may contaminate it. With good prayer he may "build worlds," with improper prayer he may "destroy worlds." According to Rabbi Ami, a man's prayer is answered only if he stakes his very life on it.*40 "It is a miracle that a man survives the hour of worship," the Baal Shem said. Before every morning prayer Rabbi Uri of Stetlisk would take leave of his household, telling them what should be done with his manuscripts if he should pass away while praying.

The readiness to make the supreme sacrifice for the sake of His holy name, for the sake of the truth that God is One, has long

*36Bereachoth 6a.
*37Rabbi Jehuda Halevi, Kuzari, V, 5.
*38Jerusalem Berachoth IV, 4, 8b; and Jacob Levy, Neuhebraisches und Chaldaisches Wörterbuch, Vol. IV, p. 368b.
*40Taanith 8a.
been the essence of our devotion in proclaiming, *Hear, O Israel.* When following the Bar Kochba rebellion, the Roman government prohibited the teaching of Torah, the great Rabbi Akiba continued to expound the words of God and to convey them to others. Thereupon he was arrested and eventually condemned to the hand of the executioner.

"When the Romans brought Rabbi Akiba out to execution, it was time for reading the *Shema;* and though they were combing his flesh with iron combs, he continued to take upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of heaven," he continued to read the words of the *Shema: Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy might.* His disciples said to him:

—Our master, thus far! (Although suffering such agonies, you still say the *Shema!*) And Rabbi Akiba answered them:

—Throughout my life I have been troubled with this verse, 'And thou shalt love the Lord, thy God . . . with all thy soul,' which means: Even if he take thy life. For said I, 'When will it be in my power to fulfill it?' Now that the opportunity is mine, shall I not fulfill it?

He prolonged the word *ehad* ["One" in "Hear, O Israel"], until his soul left [the body] with the word *ehad* [on his lips]. A heavenly Voice issued forth and announced, 'Happy art thou, Rabbi Akiba, that thy soul went out with the word *ehad."* 41

As we said above, prayer has the power to generate insight, it endows us often with understanding not attainable by speculation. Prayer is a way to faith. Some of mankind's deepest spiritual insights are born in moments of prayer. The following letter may serve as an illustration. 42

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41 *Berachot* 6b.

42 The author of the letter, written in Hebrew, Rabbi Eliezer Epstein of Hornel in Russia (1780–1867) was a disciple of the "old master," the founder of the *Hasid* school within the hasidic movement, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi (1745–1812) and of his son, Rabbi Baer (died 1837). The letter was written before the year 1827.

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A Letter About Faith

I remember the days of old, when the love that we had for each other was like the love one has for his own soul. How could I refrain from speaking to you? . . .

Listen to me, my beloved brother. Do not think that what I say is heresy or philosophy. What I am going to say is the essence of faith which has the power to revive the dead and through which even dry bones can feel the living God.

All *hasidim,* particularly the disciples of our great Master, whose soul is in heaven, have attained the kind of faith [which I will now describe]. It is something we discover and experience particularly in the "Silent prayer," following all the meditations in the "Psalms of Praise," and in the *Shema.* Then comes the faith and the insight that *All is God.* And the darkness of "the world of confusion," of the confusion of good and evil, retreats from our sight. One still realizes that the world is as it was, [that nothing external has changed], but it does not matter, it does not affect one's faith. . . .

Such insight, such faith may be attained in one of two ways.

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