

from "The Way Into Jewish Prayer," Rabbi  
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### All of the World Is a Place for Prayer

Finally, beyond the prayers of synagogue and home, which could be planned because the times for them were fixed, there were the events of everyday life that evoked blessings, often unexpectedly. Indeed, though often hard, the workaday world was conceptualized not as a daily grind but as an opportunity for prayers that celebrate creation and our human place within it. Still today, the performance of commandments like illuminating a home with Shabbat candlelight, for instance, evokes the words "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, ruler of the world, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us to kindle Shabbat lights." But God's presence was likely to become evident not just in the moment when a divine commandment was being performed but at any time or place, like the breathtaking surprise of coming across a desert landscape or a redwood forest, for which one says, "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who created the universe." The thinking behind these blessings that celebrate nature—not just its extraordinary manifestations but even such ordinary beauty as a tree in blossom—is especially instructive.

North American culture divides human activity into simple oppositions. We are either at work or at play, on vacation or on the job, in school or at recess. We instinctively treat prayer, therefore, as what you do when you are in synagogue (or church) but not in the office, the garden, the playground, or the car. Judaism takes just the opposite point of view. Though not all of life is holy,

the holy can come bursting through the everyday at any time. Jews were therefore to be ready for such occasions by reciting appropriate blessings for happening upon the sacred: a rainbow, a flower, thunder and lightning, an ocean, a wise teacher, hearing good news (or even bad)—all of these occasions evoke a blessing from Jews, who know that prayer is an inherent part of life, not something reserved just for specific days of the week or year and for certain places but not others.

It is written (in Psalm 24:1), "The earth and its fullness belong to God." But Psalm 115:16 says, "God has given it to human beings." There is no contradiction. The first verse reflects the situation before we say a blessing; the second verse describes the case after the blessing has been said.<sup>3</sup>

Our rabbinic aphorism indicates that appreciating the universe without saying a blessing is a sin, because it is like pillaging God's universe. But if we pause to say a blessing over a wonder of nature, thereby demonstrating our appreciation of whatever we are saying a blessing over, God releases it into our care.

As we can see, Judaism has three kinds of fixed prayer: the daily synagogue service; prayers to be said at home, chiefly around the table; and a lexicon of prayers for special occasions when God's presence bursts in upon our daily routine. No wonder prayer is a discipline. It involves being in certain places at certain times, and practicing the art of saying certain things when the occasion calls for them. Becoming a prayerful person is like becoming a marathon runner or a world-class chef. It takes regular practice. And it presupposes failures along the way to ultimate success.

But it is important to know what counts for success. People who think of prayer solely as a way to ask God for favors miss the point. People who carp at the literal meaning of words without appreciating the grandeur of the human position that makes speech

possible in the first place miss the forest for the trees. A very old prayer we say on Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement and widely regarded as the holiest day of the year, recounts the gravity of human sin but then concludes, “You distinguished human beings from the beginning: you recognize us when we stand before you.” The word *recognize* here has the sense of “the chair recognizes the woman with her hand up,” the idea being that human beings are recognized to speak up before God in a way other animals are not.

We are gifted with speech, not just elementary speech but complex ways of becoming conscious of the world and then reflecting that consciousness in language. The medieval philosophers categorized the human species as *m’daber*—literally, “the species that speaks.” Contrary to the popular adage, talk is *not* cheap. Judaism insists that we use our words wisely. Jewish law, for instance, calls slander a sin on the metaphorical level of murder, since injuring someone’s reputation is like killing part of that person. Jewish ethics looks askance at *d’varim batelim* (pronounced d’-vah-REEM bah-tay-LEEM), mere idle chitchat. Jewish wisdom urges human beings to act as if their words matter, and that means dedicating time regularly to two disciplines, both of which are allied to each other: the study of Torah and the practice of prayer. Unless we have managed to dull our sense of the incomparable mystery of life, words of prayer come naturally to us, just because we are alive. It is what happens automatically as long as we view the world with what Heschel called “radical amazement.” By contrast, he says, “The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God, and the importance of worship, is to take things for granted.”<sup>4</sup> Judaism reserves regular moments to regain our sense of amazement, and it celebrates those moments with words that link us to thousands of years of tradition. Prayer in the Jewish mode, then, is like painting with oils or playing the violin. We may have a natural talent to respond to the universe with awe, but that talent needs to be nurtured to the point where it becomes an art.

## Prayer as Art

Contrary to popular imagination, great art is rooted in discipline. Vincent Van Gogh, who worked endlessly to perfect the brush stroke that made him famous, wrote to his brother Theo, “In art, one cannot have too much patience.”<sup>5</sup> So too with prayer. It is true that spontaneous expressions of appreciation are possible, and in dire circumstances we are apt to find our own simple but ardent words of request readily at hand as well. But the deeper sense of prayerfulness that Judaism values comes about only with practice.

The important word here is *kavanah* (pronounced kah-vah-NAH), a term we now use to refer to the inner intentionality by which we pay attention to our prayers rather than let them deteriorate into meaningless rote. In the rabbinic era, when prayer leaders had no prayer books and therefore had to memorize or make up their prayers on the spot, it meant “creative spontaneity” and described the ideal art by which prayer leaders would spontaneously make up a novel expression of a prayer’s theme, rather than reuse an old and tired rendition that everyone had heard over and over again. The Mishnah provides a second-century snapshot of four Rabbis arguing about the relative place of spontaneity in prayer. The prayer they have in mind is the same one we looked at in chapter 1, the *Amidah*, or *Sh’moneh Esrei* (the eighteen benedictions).

Rabban Gamaliel says, “Each day one should pray the eighteen benedictions.” Rabbi Joshua says, “A summary version of the eighteen is sufficient.” Rabbi Akiva says, “If one is fluent in prayer, one should say all eighteen, but if not, the summary version suffices.” Rabbi Eliezer says, “If you make your prayer a fixed task, your supplications are invalid.”<sup>6</sup>

Rabban Gamaliel is the Rabbi who is credited with having

formulated the *Sh'moneh Esrei* in the first place. His title, Rabban, rather than Rabbi, indicates that he was a first among equals, an authority known as the Patriarch, who, among other things, represented the Jewish community to the Roman authorities and who therefore was of higher standing than his rabbinic peers. As a Rabbi with authority to make rules, Rabban Gamaliel had mandated eighteen benedictions as a daily staple in the worship service. No wonder Gamaliel's position is that everyone should pray all eighteen blessings: he had decreed them in the first place.

But as we saw, there was no prayer book yet. Saying all the blessings was a lot harder than it is now, since there was nothing to read. Worshipers would have had to memorize or compose on the spot whatever they were going to say, and that is why the second Rabbi, Joshua, argues that a simple summary form of all eighteen is enough. Akiva, the third Rabbi to speak, takes the middle ground between Gamaliel and Joshua. If the benedictions come fluently to you, say them all; if not, a shortened version is sufficient. Rabbi Eliezer disagrees with everyone. He is opposed to anything fixed at all, whether all eighteen benedictions or just a summary version, since prayers like that are likely to become mere rote, and rattling through them just to get them said is worthless.

### **Balancing *Keva* and *Kavanah***

With the writing of a prayer book, centuries later, the danger of treating prayer like a fixed task became even greater, and to this day there are many Jews who falsely identify the outward act of reading the liturgy with the inner act of worship. Heschel decries this "spiritual absenteeism." Some modern men and women "pray by proxy" (he says), letting the rabbi or cantor do the work while they sit passively in their pews turning the pages; others read the words, but they recite the prayer book "as if it were last week's newspaper.... The words are there but the souls who are to feel

their meaning, to absorb their significance, are absent. They utter shells of syllables but put nothing of themselves into the shells."<sup>7</sup>

All liturgical worship runs the risk of making prayer a fixed but sterile task. On the other hand, a certain amount of structure is desirable. All ritual depends upon it. We like to be able to anticipate what is going to happen; we enjoy songs we know and favorite prayers that we have memorized. Rabbi Eliezer's vote for pure spontaneity, therefore, did not become normative. As Judaism has a word for spontaneity, *kavanah*, so too it has one for fixity: *keva* (pronounced KEH-vah). Jewish prayer balances spontaneity with fixity.

In practice, *keva* and *kavanah* have meant different things at different times. When there were no prayer books, people made up the words anew every time they prayed. That, at least, was the ideal. So when Gamaliel mandated eighteen benedictions at every service, he did not necessarily have any particular words in mind. He was demanding only a certain thematic order, each theme being allotted a separate benediction. People would pray for wisdom, for instance, and then repentance, and so forth. The particular words that expressed these petitions, however, were up to the worshipers. Indeed, since average worshipers were probably unable to remember the exact order of the blessings, and probably were unable also to frame them with beautiful rhetoric, a prayer leader was charged with making up the blessings one by one. Jews lacking oratorical skill would listen to the prayers that the prayer leader said, and then answer "Amen," much as listeners to sermons by great African-American preachers regularly punctuate what they hear with "Amen" or similar affirmations.

Rabbis, however, were expected to be able to lead prayer. Unlike the population at large, they devoted their lives to mastering the words of Jewish tradition. They had a repertoire of biblical expressions that they could draw on at will, and they knew the stock ways that great speakers in the Greco-Roman world made their

points. Prayer “out loud,” then, was indeed an art—the art of Greco-Roman rhetoric applied to Jewish worship. Thinking of themselves, the Rabbis held that “from people’s benedictions, you can tell if they are fools or sages.”<sup>8</sup> Fools simply reiterate the same old words time after time. Sages create novel blessings for each occasion, quoting from the Bible in creative ways and making up poetic prayers that touch the soul. In antiquity, therefore, *keva* was the fixed order that gave services their shape and the choice of the right rhetorical devices to fit the occasion on hand. *Kavanah* was the novelty that made one service unlike all the others: the specific words chosen, the juxtaposition of a particularly clever biblical citation with a creative interpretation, and so forth. An analogy to worship back then would be Beethoven’s nine symphonies. They all have the same shape—they are given the same number of movements, for instance, and obey the rules that make a classical symphony what it is, rather than some other composition like an etude or a concerto. But each one is unique in terms of the notes that constitute the symphony’s content. From Beethoven’s perspective, the standard shape he felt obliged to follow was the *keva*; the novel musical content in each case was the *kavanah*.

### To Dream in League with God

But the minute Beethoven’s symphonies were written out so that musicians could perform them, the meaning of *keva* and *kavanah* changed. Orchestras do not make up the notes from scratch. They follow the composer’s note-by-note instructions. *Keva* would now be going through the notes in the right order. But there is such a thing as musical *kavanah*, nonetheless. It is the creative interpretation of the piece, which makes one performance magnificent and another humdrum. So too with prayer. After prayer books came into being, the option of making up all the blessings was gone. *Kavanah* became the way the prayers are read. Every worshiper is

like a musical performer, going about the task of saying words that are hallowed by tradition, but able to do so with newly discovered meaning each and every time. As Heschel said, some people insist on reading their prayers as if they are reading last week’s newspaper. Others, however, attend carefully to what the words mean, think deeply of their consequences, and commit their very being to the prayer book’s vision of a better world. Such people, Heschel tells us, know that “To pray is to dream in league with God.”<sup>9</sup>

If prayer is an art, however, it is an art that all of us can learn, because we are all gifted to be *m’daber*, “the species that speaks.” All of us are recognized when we stand before God. Once we divest ourselves of the elementary and childish notion that the purpose of prayer is only to get petitions answered positively, we can begin the art of prayer all over again, hoping to take our rightful place as recognized actors in the universe. Prayer allows us to appreciate the universe, to express our hopes of what a better universe might be, even to shout defiance when we see injustice occurring. Prayer is a way to elevate our thoughts to speech, and even to formulate better thoughts because of the power that speech has over the way we think. Because it draws on traditional language, it roots us in the history of a hallowed past, and because it is primarily communal, it overcomes loneliness by binding us to a worldwide community that dares to “dream in league with God.”