as carefully to prayers by ordinary Christians, Jews, and Muslims, for instance.

But even if the prayed-over population did get better on account of the evangelicals' prayers, it is not clear that the results would still be good news. Suppose, for instance, that without the prayers, 50 percent of the people tended to get better and 50 percent did not, but that with the prayers, 60 percent were cured while only 40 percent remained sick. What would we say to the 40 percent whom God apparently passed over? Either God would have to be somewhat whimsical, curing some but not others, or the sick people would have to conclude that they were sinners, undeserving of God's beneficence.

In other words, it may be that God really is a humanlike deity who commands that we pray, hears our prayers, and rewards the good among us. But that simple solution to the problem of prayer embroils us in theological or moral difficulties. At any rate, Jewish tradition does not demand that we believe in that sort of God. Even though the Bible and rabbinic literature regularly speak of God that way, Jewish tradition also offers us more sophisticated concepts of the divine and a deeper conception of prayer that goes with them.

Too Much Praise?

The Talmud relates an anecdote about Rabbi Chaninah, probably a third-century authority in the Land of Israel. It pictures him in synagogue listening to a prayer called the *T'fillah* (t'-fee-LAH or, commonly, t'-FEE-lah). The word *T'fillah* (which means "prayer") is sometimes used for any or all of our prayers, but technically it denotes a particular prayer that nowadays is usually called the *Amidah* (pronounced ah-mee-DAH or, commonly, ah-MEE-dah, meaning "standing") or the *Sh'moneh Esrei* (pronounced sh'-MOH-neh ES-ray, meaning "eighteen"). Each of the three titles tells

us something about this famous prayer. It was called the *T'fillah* because the Rabbis thought of it as *the* prayer par excellence. Since the Rabbis thought of it as the means by which we approach God for conversation about our needs, the way subjects in an empire approach the emperor, it is said standing—hence the name *Amidah*, the prayer that we say while standing. Structurally, it is made up of a series of independent smaller prayers called blessings (more on blessings later), which now number nineteen in all but were only eighteen in number originally: thus, the name *Sh'moneh Esrei*, the prayer with eighteen blessings.

The other character in the anecdote is an unnamed prayer leader, who is described as "going down" to lead the *T'fillah*. Typically, Jewish prayer is arranged as a dialogue between the congregation and its prayer leader, whose Hebrew designation is *sh'liach tsibur* (pronounced sh'-lee-AKH tsee-BOOR or, commonly, sh-LEE-akh TSEE-boor), "an agent [or representative] of the congregation." The dialogue-like format was probably influenced by the vision of the prophet Isaiah, who saw angels praising God in such a way that "one would call to the other, 'Holy, holy, holy'" (Isaiah 6:3). This threefold praise of God as "holy" is an important part of Jewish (and Christian) prayer still. Since the angels of Isaiah's vision sang their praises responsively, Jewish worship was designed in a similarly responsive fashion. The prayer leader calls to the people, and the congregation responds. Nowadays, in traditional services, the back-and-forth dialogue whereby prayer leader and congregation take turns chanting each paragraph of Hebrew prayer is called davening (pronounced DAH-v'n-ing), a Yiddish word of uncertain origin; and the prayer leader, or *sh'liach tsibur*, is usually a specially trained master of the prayers and their melodies, known as a cantor, or, in Hebrew, a *chazan* (pronounced khah-ZAHN, or, commonly, KHUH-z'n).

Descriptions of prayer leaders in third-century Babylon say that when it came time for them to begin, they would "go down"

from their seat to the front of the room, and direct the *Amidah* from there. Either the room was actually sloped downward so that the leaders stood somewhat below the other worshipers, or they thought of themselves as being in a particularly lowly position as they approached the great and mighty deity on the congregation's behalf. The spatial arrangement or the feeling of praying out of deep humility may have been inspired by Psalm 130:1: "Out of the depths I call to You Adonai; Adonai, listen to my cry. Let your ears be attentive to my plea for mercy." At any rate, our story is a report of a prayer leader who "went down" to the front of the room and then led the *Amidah* in the presence of Rabbi Chaninah.

We shall see also that Rabbi Chaninah refers to some people called the Men of the Great Assembly, and it is not entirely clear who they were. The problem is the Rabbis were not historians. Nonetheless, they felt the need to claim an unbroken chain of tradition from Moses to their own time. The Bible virtually ends with the account of Nehemiah and his generation (fifth century B.C.E.), whereas the Rabbis came into being only in the middle of the second century B.C.E.. That meant that they had a vacuum of some three hundred years between Nehemiah and themselves. Someone had to have been in charge of passing on Jewish tradition from Nehemiah's day to their own, they reasoned. But not knowing who, they made up a generic term for all of that era's leaders who had faithfully transmitted older biblical wisdom to their rabbinic spiritual heirs. They were said to be part of a body known as the Men of the Great Assembly. For all we know, such a group never really existed; it may have been a fictitious construct by Rabbis who knew someone had to have been in charge but didn't know who those "someones" were. When Chaninah cites the Men of the Great Assembly, he means to say that he has a very old tradition going back not quite as far as the Bible but at least long before Rabbis like himself had come into being.

A certain prayer leader went down in the presence of Rabbi Chaninah and said, "O God, great, mighty, awesome, majestic, powerful, terrifying, strong, courageous, certain, and honored."

Rabbi Chaninah waited until he had finished, and then asked him, "Have you finally finished all the praise of your master? Why do we need all this praise? Even with just the three adjectives that we do say ["great, mighty, and awesome"], were it not for the fact that Moses himself used them in the Torah, so that the Men of the Great Assembly later ordained them as an official part of the *T'fillah*, we wouldn't even be able to say them, and yet here you are saying all of this!"[1]

This short anecdote reveals a great deal about how the Rabbis prayed and how they conceptualized God.

First, they agonized over the right words to use when praising God. Nowadays (following Rabbi Chaninah), the very first of the *Amidah*'s eighteen sections addresses God as "great, mighty, and awesome." Those words go back to the book of Nehemiah, the governor in Jerusalem in the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. In 587, the Babylonian army had destroyed the ancient kingdom of Judah, carrying its leaders into captivity. Shortly thereafter, Persia defeated Babylonia and allowed the exiles to return home. Waves of emigration back to the Land of Israel followed, all the way into the middle of the fifth century, when Nehemiah arrived on Persia's behalf to oversee its colony in the making. Nehemiah cites a prayer in which Israel reaffirms its covenant with God, and in it, God is praised for being "great, mighty, and awesome."

Apparently, these were the adjectives that Rabbi Chaninah was used to hearing in the *Amidah*'s opening line, but the prayer leader in the story added several other epithets of praise. Chaninah condemned what he considered an overabundance of verbiage, because

it seemed to imply that if only we could pick enough words of praise, we would be able to describe God adequately. According to Chaninah, only the three words "great, mighty, and awesome" are appropriate, and we wouldn't even say *them* were it not for the fact that Moses used them separately here and there in the Five Books of Moses (the first five books of the Bible, which Jews call the Torah), and if Nehemiah hadn't provided a precedent when he strung them together in his day. Chaninah concludes that the Men of the Great Assembly, who followed Nehemiah in leadership, must have canonized them in their prayer, so that Chaninah and the Jews among whom he prays now use them similarly. The point of the story is the lesson that while praise of God is a good thing, too much praise is inappropriate. We learn also that even though communal prayer is an invention of the Rabbis, its language is frequently rooted in biblical precedent.

We see too that for the Rabbis, the most central prayer in Jewish liturgy was the *Amidah*. In the third century C.E., the *Amidah* was already being led by a specially appointed representative of the congregation, who stepped down to an area in front of everyone else, or who thought of himself as doing so, and who began, as we still do, with the words of praise that Nehemiah had known. Until the twentieth century, these prayer leaders, and all the Rabbis too, were always men, so all our talmudic or medieval accounts feature men in these positions, never women. Nowadays, we still have such prayer leaders, and they may be men or women. They are usually trained as cantors (about whom we will have more to say in chapter 4), and they still lead prayer responsively, although they do not "go down" to do so. Instead, they usually "go up" to a platform where people can see them. A further and more important difference is that ever since the ninth century, they have not had to memorize or make up the prayers as they go along, the way the prayer leader in our story does. Instead, they chant the prayers aloud from a prayer book called a *siddur*—pronounced see-DOOR or, commonly, SIH-d'r—meaning "order [of prayers]." Actually, the *siddur* contains only the daily and Sabbath (or Shabbat, pronounced shah-BAHT) liturgy. Holiday prayers are in a separate volume called a *machzor* (pronounced mahkh-ZOHR or, commonly, MAHKH-z'r), meaning "cycle" and referring to the festivals that recur according to an annual cycle of time. A third and final book of prayer that is commonly used accompanies the festive dinner that inaugurates Passover—the *seder* (pronounced SEH-der or, commonly, SAY-der and, like *siddur*, which sounds similar, another word denoting the "order" of the prayers for the occasion). That book is called the *haggadah* (pronounced hah-gah-DAH or, commonly, hah-GAH-dah), meaning "recounting," since the purpose of the *seder* is to recount the tale of how God freed Israel from Egyptian bondage.

The most important lesson from the story, however, and the main reason for introducing it here, is what it tells us implicitly about the Rabbis' view of God. The prayer leader is faulted for imagining that he can ever capture God's essence, even if he has all the words of praise in the Hebrew language. *In theory, no words of praise should be said at all, since God is beyond description.* But the Bible praises God anyway, so in practice we do too, although we are careful not to say too much. We do not want to give the impression that we are really capturing the essence of a God who is so utterly beyond our descriptive capacity as to be actually beyond the scope of human language.

"Great, mighty, and awesome" are the three words that make it into the permitted vocabulary that introduces the *Amidah*. They point to the fact that the Bible (and therefore the Rabbis) picture God mostly as a mighty ruler. But since human language can never fully get at the essence of God, we should not imagine that God is really like that. The biblical God is described also as being many other things, not all of them compatible with one another. As the Rabbis put it, "The Bible speaks in human language" in order that