

WES NA'ALEH ADULT BAR/BAT MITZVAH PROGRAM: PRAYER

1. Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan on Prayer:

After all the years of thinking on the problem of religion I am still at a loss how to connect the conclusions I hold with the actual situation in which we find ourselves. I know very well what I mean by God. ***God to me is the process that makes for creativity, integration, love and justice. The function of prayer is to render us conscious of that process.*** I can react with a sense of holiness or momentousness to existence because it is continually being worked upon by this divine process. I am not troubled by the least by the fact that God is not an identifiable being.; for that matter neither is my Ego an identifiable being. Kaplan Journal January 15, 1931, in Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Vol. 1 1913-1934, ed. Mel Scult (Wayne State Press: 2001)

Prayer aims at deriving, from the Process that constitutes God, the power that would strengthen the forces and relationships by which we fulfill ourselves as persons. We cannot help ***being aware of our dependence on the Process which we identify as God, namely on all that makes for goodness, truth and beauty in the world***, for our success in achieving a mature, effective, and well-adjusted personality, and we naturally articulate that need in prayer. Questions Jews Ask, pp. 103-104, cited in Dynamic Judaism, ed. Mel Scult (Fordham Press, 1991), p. 216.

2. Rabbi Arthur Green on Prayer: Seek my Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology (1992) pp. 12-17

Let us think of the journey to God as a journey inward, where the goal is an ultimately deep level within the self rather than the top of the mountain or a ride in the clouds.... Prayer, our sages surely knew, is an inward act. "The Compassionate One wants the heart," the Talmud teaches. The locus of activity in human reaching for God is primarily inward, a turning of mind and heart that is attested by, but never fully subsumed within, outward deeds.... This inwardness is not only that of the person, but the shared inner self of the human heart, the human community, and the world around us.

Inwardness means the One is to be found within all beings. ***We find God by turning into ourselves, to be sure, but also in the inward experiences we share with others. The inner sight that we develop in such moments then leads us to see the inwardness of all creatures, to come to know them as the many faces of the One.***

Jews who know full well ... that there is no divine interference with history, *still want to pray*. And it is not only dirge and supplication or a cry of protest and anger that comes out when we pray. We want to sing to the universe, to recount its beauty, to celebrate the life that goes on after all. This act of affirmation exists on an infinitely deeper plane than does the question, "Do you believe in God?" ...

The deeper act of worship calls for a more profound self-understanding as well. Despite what the words say, our prayer is not quite addressed to that Other who creates, commands and saves. Our prayer is a cry and song to life itself, called forth from our own innermost self, address to the wonder and mystery of life that we have dared to call again by this ancient and holy name.

The self who continues to live in the world of “self” and “other” needs the dualistic language of “I” and “Thou” even though it does not mirror the deepest truth we know.

THE FORM (KEVA) AND THE FEELING (KAVVANAH) OF JEWISH PRAYER

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אָמַר, הָיִי זָהִיר בְּקִרְיַאת שְׁמַע (וּבְתַפִּלָּה). וּבְשִׂאתָה מִתְפַּלֵּל, אַל תַּעַשׂ תַּפְלִתָּךְ קִבֵּעַ, אֲלֵא רַחֲמִים וְתַחֲנוּנִים לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם בָּרוּךְ הוּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יואל ב) בִּי תַנּוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְנָחָם עַל הָרָעָה. וְאַל תִּהְיֶה רָשָׁע בְּפָנֶי עֲצֻמָּךְ:

Rabbi Shimon said, "Be very careful in reciting the Shema and the Tefilah (the Amidah). When you pray, don't make your prayer a fixed form, but rather [infuse it with] a plea for mercy and grace before God, as Scripture teaches, 'For God is a compassionate and gracious God, long suffering and abounding in steadfast love and relenting of evil.' [Joel 2:13] [Moreover] don't be wicked in your own mind." Pirkei Avot ("Ethics of the Fathers") 2:13

Keva and Kavvanah: How the Balance of Keva (routine) and Kavvanah (intention) inform Judaism and the thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel" (Rabbi Arnold J Wolf, from "Abraham Joshua Heschel after Twenty-five Years," in Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought, Winter, 1998.

Professor Lawrence Hoffman of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, our most astute student of Jewish liturgy, describes the three great periods of creative Jewish prayer-making. The first, the classical period of the rabbis, provided what that age needed: *limits*. It offered interpretations of when, how, and in what way the prayers were to be arranged and recited. It gave us structure, keva, the framework and the details of Jewish worship. The second age, the beginnings of modernism in the 19th century, gave us a *philosophy* of Jewish prayer: what was meant and what could be meant by the words of our siddur (Jewish prayer book), as well as the "ideas" of the Bible and Talmuds. Concepts were an important need, and ideas in plenty were provided by European Jewish thinkers who gave Judaism a place in modern thought.

Now, says Hoffman, *our community is no longer in particular need of limits or of ideas so much as of meaning*, a way to connect the scattered threads of our separate lives and tie them to a meaningful pattern, what he calls "connecting the dots." The tasks of structure and signification have been accomplished. Our generation and the one to come must perfect the performance of our liturgy, the realization of all our past by bringing our needs to God and sharing our deepest spiritual concerns with our community.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the greatest interpreter of Jewish prayer in our century, has a somewhat different notion of prayer. He balances keva and kavanah, the fixity of our prayer-book and the spontaneity of our heart. He will surrender neither of the poles of Jewish worship. He believes that we must not only express our needs, but create them, that God is not here to do what we wish, but to help us wish to do what God needs doing. Our prayer is a way of coming to feel, as well as a way of expressing concerns. In principle, we can come to need what God needs, to feel what God feels, and to become what God wants us to be. ***Inwardness and community are both crucial, but so is hearing the music of God's song and coming to experience God's love. "Spirituality" is more than seeking for***

God within or between our several selves.

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 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.

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 kavvanah, he is to be regarded ex post facto as having fulfilled his duty. In prayer, however, halakhah [Jewish law] insists upon the primacy of inwardness, of kavvanah over the external performance, at least theoretically. Thus, Maimonides declares, "Prayer without kavvanah is no prayer at all. He who has prayed without kavvanah 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. 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 halakhah 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 halakhah that we belong to God not occasionally, intermittently, 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.

Heschel wrote: "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" (*Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954, pp. 64-68).

A BASIC OUTLINE OF MORNING PRAYER

Birchot ha-Shachar: morning blessings for bodily functions and *neshamah* (soul/spirit/non-corporeal essence)

Pesukei d'Zimrah ("Verses of Song"): passages from Psalms to "awaken" as an individual

Barchu ("Bless!"): call to notice/affirm common source of blessing, creation of minyan

1. Yotzer Or: Creation

Finding Godliness in Light/Order/Nature

2. Ahavah Rabbah: Revelation

Finding Godliness in Love/Enlightenment/Torah/Unification

Shema (Listening/Attending/Presence) and its Three *Parshiyot*/Paragraphs:

1. *V'ahavta* ("you shall love"):

Experiencing Godliness in loving and teaching

2. *V'haya im shamoa* ("if you really pay attention")

Discerning a path of Godliness and consequences of being lost

3. *Vayomer* (*tzitzit*):

Committing to practicing Godliness

3. Ge'ulah: Redemption

Finding Godliness in the process of Liberation/Redemption/Enlightening

Amidah: Praise/request needs/thanks¹

Praise:

1. *Avot/Imahot*: spiritual lineage

2. *Gevurot*: praising God as Animating Force/Power

3. *Kedushah*: awareness of the sacred dimension of life

Requests:

4. *Kedushat Hayom* (Shabbat/holiday, or on weekdays requests 4-16²)

Thanks:

5. *Avodah*: gratitude for being "heard"

6. *Hoda'ah*: gratitude for the constant miraculousness of life

7. *Shalom*: gratitude for/awareness of interconnectedness of life

Aleinu: translating potential/latent Oneness into reality by our actions

¹ Rabbi Yehudah said: A man should never petition for his needs in either the first three blessings or in the last three, but rather in the middle ones. For Rabbi Hanina said: In the first ones he resembles a servant who is addressing a tribute to his master; in the middle ones he resembles a servant who is requesting a largess from his master; in the last ones he resembles a servant who has received a largess from his master and takes his leave. **Babylonian Talmud Berachot 34a**

² Knowledge/Understanding, Repentance, Forgiveness, Redemption, Healing, Abundance, Ingathering, Justice, Overcoming Divisions, Compassion for Righteous, Rebuilding Jerusalem, Salvation, Accepting Prayer