



BACK TO THE SOURCES

Reading the Classic Jewish Texts



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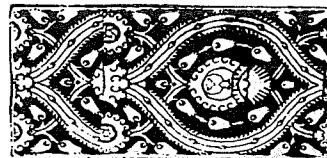
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Prayer

and the Prayerbook

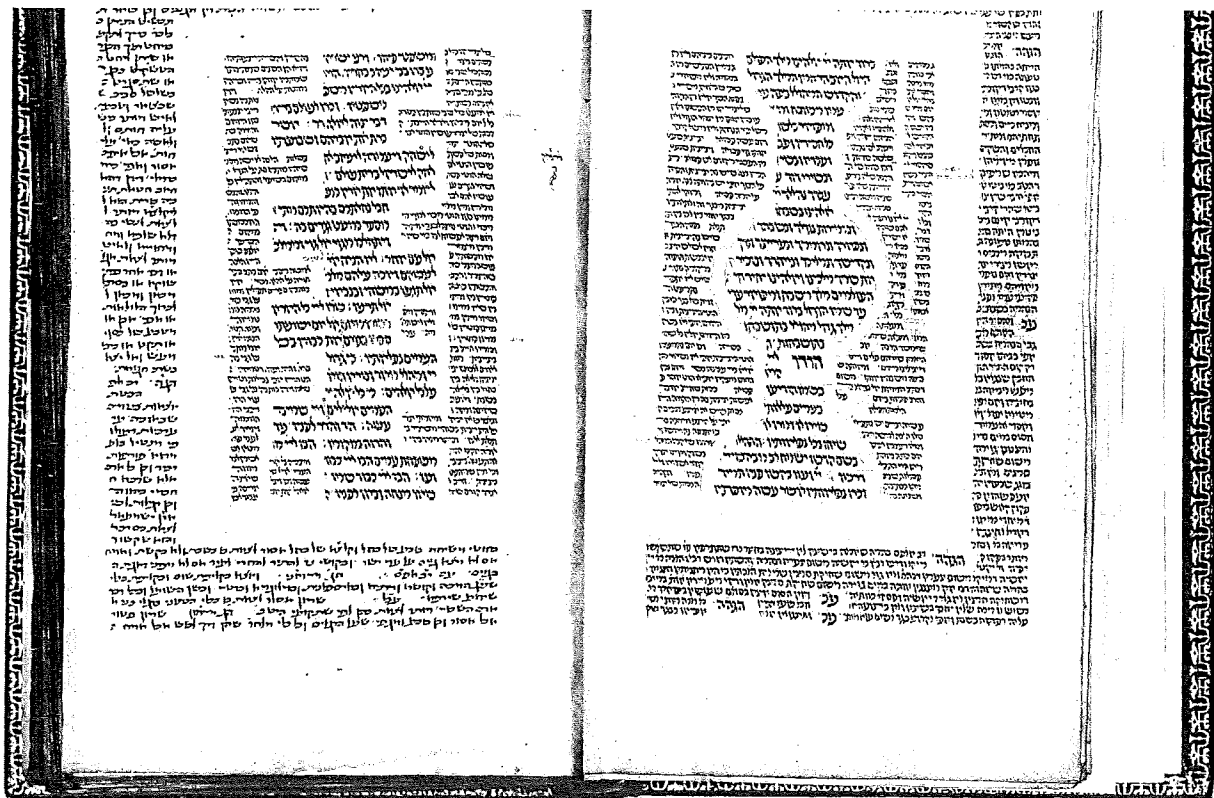
ALAN MINTZ



Judaism is a civilization of remarkable persistence; perhaps the most remarkable is the case of prayer. Bestir yourself on a Friday evening or a Saturday morning anywhere in the world where there are Jews and you will likely find a congregation reciting Hebrew prayers several thousand years old. Nor is this a quaint vestige. Gathering for prayer is the preeminent central activity of most branches of Jewish life today, and it is within the roomy framework of the synagogue service that much else takes place: Torah study, rites of passage, political commentary, and even fund raising.

This combination of antiquity and centrality enjoyed by Jewish prayer is the result of its distinctively composite nature: Jewish prayer is both a text and an experience. As a text, Jewish prayer is a prayerbook, a classical written liturgy, a structure of words and ideas, which, like any text, is open to literary and theological analysis within the terms of the historical periods that produced it. As experience, Jewish prayer also incorporates the several means by which the text is brought to life: what takes place in the inner, subjective world of the worshiper during prayer; the communal arrangements and nonverbal techniques of the practice of prayer; and the contemporary interpretations of the meaning of the text of the liturgy.

Although there have been attempts at prayerbook reform in the modern period, the text of the liturgy has remained relatively stable over the ages. Not so with the experience of prayer. How Jews have prayed and what the ancient words have meant to them have differed at various



From Siddur Tzarfat, prayerbook from France, 14–15th centuries, done in calligraphy with commentary in margin

times, sometimes radically. The elaborate inner drama experienced in prayer by the mystics of sixteenth-century Safed (discussed in Chapter Six), for example, was something very different from the associations conjured up by the recitation of the same words by their contemporary coreligionists. The best analogy is to great drama. A play of Shakespeare's is not just the words of the play as Shakespeare wrote them. It comes to life only in the realization of those words by actors on the stage. Although the text has been little altered, through its production each age has given a different coloration to the play: the classical Shakespeare, the romantic Shakespeare, the absurdist Shakespeare, and so on. Similarly, the prayerbook exists only by virtue of its being prayed, that is, in the "realizations" of successive generations.

So, while most of what follows is devoted to explicating the text of the liturgy, it should be kept in mind that Jewish prayer exists at the same time along another axis. If this other axis, the dramatic-experiential one, were our principal focus, it would make sense to speak of the prayerbook as an orchestrating of a sequence of spiritual states, and then to identify these states by referring to categories in the phenomenology of religion. However, since the concentration here is on the prayerbook as text—reading it as opposed to praying it, as it were—the approach will be literary, which is to say, attentive to the ways in which words will be literary, and the ways ideas are woven into thematic patterns. In expressing ideas and the ways ideas are woven into thematic patterns. In analyzing the liturgy, the modern explicator unfortunately cannot make use of a rich history of traditional commentary. The Torah and the Talmud were always texts to be studied, to be puzzled out word by word, and each generation contributed its stratum of commentary. The word, and each generation contributed its stratum of commentary. The prayerbook, in contrast, was not part of the curriculum; it was to be actively utilized in worship, not studied. With some exceptions, then (for example, the works of David ben Joseph Abudarham, who lived in Spain in the fourteenth century), attention to the prayers as objects of study in themselves began only with the rise of "scientific" Jewish research in the nineteenth century (see the bibliography).

The major features of the prayerbook crystallized during the first two centuries of the Common Era. Until that time, Jewish worship had been comprised of two activities that remained quite distinct: the spontaneous verbal prayer of the individual and the sacrificial ritual of the central cult in the Jerusalem Temple. The Hebrew Bible abounds with examples of individual prayers: Moses advocating the cause of the people after the sin of the Golden Calf (Exod. 32), the barren Hannah praying for a child at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1), David singing praises to God for saving him from his enemies (2 Sam. 22), Jonah crying out from the belly of

the whale (Jon. 2), and of course, that great anthology of prayers, the Book of Psalms. These biblical prayers express a variety of functions: intercession, petition, and thanksgiving; what they have in common is their ad hoc nature. Their impetus is a moment of heightened awareness, either of distress or grace. They are spontaneous and voluntary prayers in the sense that they are undertaken neither as the fulfillment of an obligation, nor in accordance with a received formula, nor at a fixed time.

The divine service in Jerusalem was conducted in a different mode altogether. The order, procedures, and categories of the sacrifices are precisely defined in the Book of Leviticus. At the center of the ritual stood not words but a material act, the "offering up" of an ox or a lamb or the pouring out on the altar of precious oils. Sacrifices were offered on behalf of the people as a whole on a daily basis and on special occasions (see the elaborate rituals recounted in the Yom Kippur liturgy); individuals would dedicate offerings in the Temple for the purpose of expiating sins or acknowledging good fortune. Although individuals would dedicate their offerings, they would not themselves offer them upon the altar. Whether individual or communal, all sacrifices had to be performed through the intermediacy of the *kohanim* (priests), the hereditary religious professionals; and only in one central place, in the Jerusalem Temple, could a person undertake these acts of atonement and thanksgiving.

In 70 C.E. Roman legions destroyed the Temple, and after the suppression of the Bar Kochba Rebellion in 135, it became clear that the Temple would not be rebuilt for an indefinite time, perhaps only in a messianic era after the "conclusion" of history. With the destruction came the cancellation of the sacrificial system; the sanctioned channels through which man achieved communication and reconciliation with God were cut off. The measures taken by the rabbis to counteract the despair and alienation potential in the aftermath of the catastrophe—measures that had been evolving for some time—involved combining components of individual prayer and sacrificial ritual. Verbal prayer uttered by the individual—what the rabbis called "the service of the heart"—was declared to be a wholly adequate substitute for the sacrifices; it was, moreover, an experience open to all Jews, not just to members of the priesthood, and it could be engaged in wherever the individual found himself, not just in Jerusalem.

However, the rigorously regulated structure of the sacrificial regime was applied to the spontaneity of individual verbal prayer. A fixed liturgy was established, made up of scriptural verses and newly composed

formulas which served as a minimum framework for prayer. This was the Siddur, literally "the ordering," and Siddur became the standard Jewish term for the prayerbook. Mandated, also, were the hours and frequency of prayer, corresponding to the great communal sacrifices in the Temple. Although a Jew did not have to be a priest to pray, one did have to be as careful as a priest in the fulfilling of these obligations. And although prayer did not have to be recited in a central place, a Jew was enjoined to pray in the company of other Jews rather than alone. One's congregation or synagogue (*bet kennessef*), wherever it was, would be a miniature of the lost sanctuary.

The genius of this fusion sustained Judaism in a moment of spiritual emergency. The medievals contributed certain elements (the Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat service, the Simhat Torah celebration, the memorial prayers for the dead, and others), but the prayerbook remains to this day essentially a document of the early rabbis.

Two points should be made at this juncture. First, this fusion, as I've presented it, is a schematization of a complex process which is the subject of scholarly conjecture and debate. The attitudes of the rabbis to the Temple cult, while it was in operation and after its forced cancellation, are complex, and some would say ambivalent. This equivocation is expressed in the fact that while the liturgy for Sabbath and festivals enumerates precisely the sacrifices once offered in the Temple on those occasions, praying indeed for their restoration, *in the meantime* the rabbis viewed these verbal prayers as fully adequate spiritual substitutes for the lost sacrifices! Second, the dates for specific prayers can usually not be given with any certainty. Archeological reconstruction of the liturgy was a major task of nineteenth-century Jewish scholarship, which had to go about its work by evaluating references in Talmudic literature, whose dating is difficult as well, and by examining the contents of medieval prayerbooks used by particular individuals and communities. Although it is extremely useful to have a general awareness of what is of rabbinic origin and what is medieval, a religious or literary appreciation of the Siddur does not require more sharply refined historical knowledge. The essence of the experience of the Siddur has always been a timeless one.

BLESSING AND AFFIRMATION

The smallest and most crucial unit of the liturgy is the *berakhah* (plural: *berakhot*), the blessing or benediction. The *berakhah* is a formula that concludes a prayer, and sometimes begins it as well. The opening

of the *berakhah* is the fixed phrase: "Praised [also translated "Blessed"] be You, Lord our God, King of the universe . . ."; the ending is varied according to the particular value or concern at hand. Here is an example from the morning service:

Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates light.

One of the key features of the fixed part of the *berakhah* (above in italics) is the double way God is addressed. When God is addressed as "You," implied is an intimate relationship with an individual pray-er, a relationship that is accessible and personal. When God is referred to as the "King of the universe," the perspective shifts to a vast cosmic plane over which God is the absolute ruler. The simultaneous immanence of God *within* the world and His transcendence *of* the world expresses the rabbis' conviction of the fundamental nature of the divine mystery. Another word which is strongly weighted in the formula is "our." Almost all the texts of the Siddur are written in the first person plural; one is never allowed to forget that it is not a God of one's own imaginings to whom the worshiper prays, and that a person's prayer is efficacious only because of one's speaking from within one's membership in a community.

The purpose of the *berakhah* is to acknowledge the primary connection between God and a phenomenon or process in the world. In the example above, the creation of light stands for the miracle of creation as a whole and for all that engenders amazement in the structure of nature and reality. The *berakhah* first heightens the utterer's sensitivity to the phenomenon itself, increasing awareness of the wonder of creation. Then it bears witness to the source of the wonder; nature is not just *there*, but owes its existence to God. The routinizing of experience and the taking of the world for granted are the great enemies of the Siddur, and the *berakhah* is an instrument for keeping them at bay. This is the meaning of praise in Jewish liturgy. To praise God or to say, "Praised are You," "Blessed art Thou," is not simply to release an emotional outpouring or to describe some beatific aspect of God's nature. It means making a connection between a phenomenon and its source; "praised" means "deserving to be acknowledged" for this reason. The praise-deserving action, it should be noted, is always phrased in the present tense. The creation of light in the *berakhah* does not refer just to the one-time event in the biblical account but to a process that is renewed daily.

The *berakhot* are distributed in two principal cycles, which make up the major components of the daily morning service (*shaharit le'hol*). We shall use the daily morning service for purposes of example because its

structure is the most inclusive. The service can be found in any traditional prayerbook; here page reference will be given in the one compiled by Philip Birnbaum. * The first cycle is called the *Shema* (pp. 77–81); the second (pp. 81–97) goes by several names: the *Amidah* (The Prayer Said Standing), the *Shemoneh Esreh* (the Eighteen *Berakhot*), or simply *Hateflah* (the Prayer). The two cycles represent, respectively, two basic modes of prayer: affirmation and petition.

In the Shema, the *berakhot*, composed by the rabbis, are constellated around three passages from the Bible, which form the theological center of the prayerbook. The passages are Deuteronomy 6.4–8 and 11.13–22 and Numbers 15.37–42. The first of these begins with one of the most famous and resonant statements in all of Jewish literature; during the service the prayer recites it with eyes closed and in a moment of great concentration:

Hear, O Israel
Shema yisra'el
 The Lord is our God
Adonai elohaynu
 The Lord is one!
Adonai ehadi!

The context for this verse in Deuteronomy reveals that it is uttered in a dramatic, interactive situation. The first phrase (“Hear, O Israel”) is spoken by God to Israel; it carries no message, only the fact of being addressed by God, the experience of divine attention. Israel responds to being addressed by proclaiming that “the Lord is our God.” In English this sounds like a redundancy; Hebrew differentiates between *Adonai*, which is the particular and proper name of God in the Bible (itself already an avoidance of the unpronounceable sacred name), and *Eloheinu*, which is the generic term for gods or divine beings. So Israel’s response has the force of declaring that God, alone of all the claimants to divinity, is He Whom we choose. The last phrase, *Adonai ehadi*, is understood by some interpreters to stress the exclusivity of the choosing of God (reading *ehad* as “alone”; “The Lord our God, the Lord alone”) and by others to introduce a further concept: the oneness of God.

Exclusive fidelity to God and God’s unity are the two major concepts of the Shema. The first demands that no system of value—not just another religion but an ideology, art, success, or personal happiness—be allowed to replace God as the *ultimate* ground of meaning. God’s

* *Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1977).

unity, conversely, asserts that all experienced moments of beauty, good, love, and holiness are not in and of themselves; they are disparate and scattered signals of the presence of the one God. Now, if this is the “message” of the Shema, the continuation of the passage from Deuteronomy, which completes the prayer’s first paragraph, mandates what to do with the message: how to be loyal to it, how to transmit it, how to remain mindful of it:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates.

By using the term love, the text implies that these truths can be fulfilled less through cognitive affirmation than through relationship; this is a relationship that passionately transcends legal obligation and demands the mobilization of all the dimensions and resources of one’s being. The question now becomes: how is this love preserved and guaranteed? The answer: by intentional, structured mindfulness. Children must be actively taught and rehearsed in the truths of God’s ways rather than being left to the vagaries of nature. The adult, too, must not trust his or her nature; one must purposefully undertake to recall to mind God’s unity within the coordinates of everyday life: morning and evening, at home and on the road. Symbols play an important role in this mnemonic regimen. The *tefillin*, the phylacteries, on hand and forehead, and the *mezuzah* affixed to the doorpost, are in themselves the source of no totemic powers. They are concrete signs that remind one of larger truths. The function of the commandments as spurs to consciousness is elaborated in the third paragraph of the Shema (Num. 15.37–42), which mandates and describes the wearing of *isshit*, fringes on garments. The middle paragraph (Deut. 11.13–22) is monitory in tone: it warns that the enjoyment of God’s grace, especially material prosperity and secure residence in the land of Israel, is absolutely contingent upon obedience to God’s will as expressed through the commandments.

The Shema proper is surrounded by three extended *berakhot*. (As a unit within the prayerbook, the whole structure of the Shema plus its *berakhot* is itself called the Shema.) The three *berakhot* deal respectively with the themes of creation, revelation, and redemption; the Shema proper comes between the second and the third.