
Some Words on the Words of Prayer

Arthur Green

How fitting that this *festschrift* be dedicated to the theme of prayer! Looking back over the years and trying to ask just who our friend and teacher Reb Zalman is, and what role he plays in Jewish life, the phrase that most comes to mind is *Baal Tefillah*. Zalman (you others will forgive me if I turn to address him directly), you are above all a Master of Prayer. I mean this phrase first in its most direct sense. Your greatest gifts are those you give when you lead prayer. This is true when you do it with Belzer *niggunim*, in your father's style, as well as when you venture into the uncharted territories of Jewish prayer for a new age in our history. You have taught three or more generations of Jews how to pray. You have given us permission to enter deeply into the act of worship, to put heart and soul into the words—or the silence—before us.

In the early days when you talked and wrote of Bnai Or (yes, it was then spelled with a "B"), your greatest enthusiasm came out when you described this wished-for community as a repository for knowledge of Jewish worship: music, textual traditions, *piyyutim*, techniques of prayer, and all the rest. I remember your dream that each *Shabbat* for such a Bnai Or might represent the traditions and style of a different Jewish ethnic

community or hasidic court. Sometimes you spoke of individuals within that community taking on the personae of such traditions, each of us embodying for a time a particular legacy within the world of Jewish prayer. To those of us who shared in your fantasy at the time, it seemed like an awesome task.

In retrospect it seems clear to me that this vision of a community was, in the best sense, an extension of yourself. You are precisely that repository, one of the Jewish people's great treasure houses of spiritual know-how. This knowledge, culled from such a wide variety of our traditional sources and then enriched over the years by your many contacts with spiritual figures from other traditions, serves as a deep well on which you draw as you teach and as you pray. May you continue to do so in good health for many years to come!

As a gift for this occasion (and I hope you will forgive this mixing of the *Baal Tefillah* with the Seven Beggars), I want to share some comments on the *siddur*, reflecting my own efforts at understanding as a davvener over these years. I choose the opening and closing six blessings of the *tefillah*, their center to be filled by the appropriate blessing of the day and by the prayer of Israel's heart.

אָרִי שְׂפתי תִּפְתָּח וְיִדַּע תְּהִלָּתְךָ — "My Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may flow with Your praise." Who, then, is the giver in this offering of prayer, and who the receiver? There is no simple one-directional flow here, but a process from which God is in no way absent. God is the one who causes my lips—and my heart—to open. Then the words seem to flow of their own accord, welling up within me. My heart is a locked garden, my mouth a stream of narrow banks. All my prayer is a song of thanksgiving to the one who calls them to open.

בְּרִכָּה — "Blessed." How singular and overdetermined translation is! If I say "blessed," where are the bending knees, the *bir kayim* that inhabit the root of this word? And where is the inner pond of water, the *berelk'ah* from which all blessings flow? Where is the energy, the surge of power that is exchanged between the blesser and the blessed? Where the love that lies behind the gift of blessing? How many words will I need to convey them, when they all dwell together in this simple *barukh*? A word of fullness beyond belief, of giving, loving, and submitting all at once. No wonder Reb Urele read *ברוך שֵׁמֶיךָ יְהוָה הַשָּׁמַיִם* to mean "A *barukh* you say and a world comes to be"—now that's a *barukh*!

אַתָּה — "You." The first two letters of this word are *aleph* and *tav*, the first and last letters of the alphabet. Since all of Creation took place through the letters, *aleph* and *tav* represent all of reality, the totality of the phenomenal world. But as a word they stand merely for *et*, the indicator of direct object. The world is only a collection of objects, of things, until we add to it the *heh*

that stands for the name of God. By doing so, we turn *et* into *atah*, or we transform our view of the world from object to subject. We address existence as a Thou; only in that address does each of us become most fully an I.

But this needed transformation of existence from "I" to "Thou" necessarily bears within it an element of distortion. The Thou is of necessity the Other. When I address you as a person, I am both presenting myself as person to you and recognizing your distinctness or otherness from me. Our communication seeks to overcome that gulf between us. But when the "other" to whom I speak is God, something I did not intend has crept in to the picture. God is surely "in here," my innermost me, as well as "out there," Your outermost You. God is the drawing together of all opposites, surely including this most basic of separations between "self" and "other." This is the *atah* of prayer: the Thou who is in truth no other.

יְהוָה/אֵלֶיךָ — Y-H, unknowable Secret! W-H, unspeakable Word! Prayer is all about *yichud HaShem*, bringing together as one the letters of Your hidden name. Letters that represent all of Being, all time and all space. No noun is this name, but a verb, one that contains all tenses at once, the "Is-Was-Will Be" of the universe and beyond. Forever elusive One! Verb dressed in noun, as soon as we seek to grasp you, seek to frame you, you run off to be verb again. "Flee, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices!"

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל — "Listen, strugglers!" we call out twice each day. No more idols! No more gods bound in space or in time! No more gods depicted and enframed! Y-H-W-H runs away from such frames. Y-H-W-H *Eloheihu* Y-H-W-H *Echad* — "Is-Was-Will Be our only God, Is-Was-Will Be One!"

Unknowable Secret, unspeakable Word, hidden in our loving submission, our all-too-human calling out of *Adonai*. "Master!" "Lord!" "O Y-H-W-H, let me make You human, let me fashion You in our image! Let me do to you what You ever seek to do to me: let me remake You as my own! For this I will do anything; I will even give my life. I stand before You and call You My Lord."

Both of them together—ever-elusive Y-H-W-H of the desert, all-loving, all-knowing *Adonai* of my soul. These two revealed to be one and the same. אֵלֶיךָ וְאֵלֵינוּ — "These"—and their union—"are my heart's desire." אֵלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ — "Our God and God of our ancestors." How different we are, and how much the same. The God we know seems so much greater, so much vaster, than the God of former generations. The universe we live in is so much more known and charted; we measure distances in light years and send persons and machines coursing through space. The lenses through which we see the small as well as the vast have forever changed our way of viewing the world; the pace at which we seek and find

knowledge has ever changed our way of learning. To say "our God and God of our ancestors" is to assert that the One of which we speak in such an age is the same One as the God of small-town Jewish scholars and shopkeepers of a hundred years ago. This is no small admission, no small act of humbling, for such as ourselves.

אלהי אברהם—"God of Avraham." Force for compassion, pole of *hesed*, first to worship. Your God is ours. Loving father, father of love, father become mother, forgiving parent. Your God is ours too. Rebel against the world, smasher of idols, battler even against heavenly decree. Your God is ours as well.

אלהי יצחק—"God of Yitzchak." You too dwell in terror, who live indeed in the shadow of the Almighty. We have here seen the shadow, have known the abandonment, and have tried hard not to flee our altar. Yes, we know your God as well, but we are still here. As you were, Father Yitzchak.

אלהי יעקב—"God of Yaakov." Inheritor of love and awe, man of conflict, dweller in two tents. Climber of the holy ladder who still had to wrestle with his own angel/demon. We are with you in struggle for this God. Thank you, Father Yaakov, for having walked that path before us.

אלהי שרה—"God of Sarah." Barren woman turned to joyful mother, laughter at God's promise, bearer of our future. We are with your God, the One you doubted and the One who gave you joy. Be with us, Mother Sarah, for we too long for children, long to see happy Jewish children as many as the sand and the stars.

אלהי ריבקה—"God of Rivkah." God of the woman who works behind the scenes, who knows how to overcome being powerless. God of the powerless, You too are now bereft of power. Learn from Mother Rivkah! Work behind the scenes, if You have to, but help us make it come out right!

אלהי רחל ו Leah—"God of Leah, God of Rachel." God of sisters, close as only sisters can be, yet each with her own strengths, each with her own path to You. Lord, be our sister, our brother, our mother, our father, our lover and beloved. Be close to us in all the ways we know closeness. Be nearer to us even than we are to ourselves.

גומל חסדים טובים—"Bestower of goodly kindnesses." The divine One is the source of *hesed*, the coursing of energy, of life, of radiance throughout the world. We accept this flow, and the ebb that must come with it, in love. We know the flow is *hesed*, and we embrace it as such. We only pray that Your *hasadim* may be good ones, from our point of view as well, not too marred by painful ebb. May the ever-rushing flow of life, moving forward from generation to generation, not leave us in too much pain along its way.

חושב חסדי אבות—"You remember parents' love and bring a redeemer to

their children's children." Of all the love that parents have in their hearts to give to their children—how much of it is lost! How many parents do not know how to love or how to show their love! How many leave their children too early, either taken by death or because of divorce or other family pain! What happens to all that lost love? You, *ribbono shel olam*, gather it all up. You remember all the love each of those parents had, and You bring it back sometime later. You bring a *go'el*, a love-restorer, to each of those families where love was lost.

למען שמי כבודך—"You do all this "for Your name's sake, in love." *Ahavah*, the love You give to us, and *ahavah*, the love we bring to You—those two loves together make up Your great Name!

ברוך אתה מן אברהם—"Bless You Y-H-W-H, Shield of Avraham." Have you ever noticed that *magen*—"shield"—and *gan*—"garden"—seem to come from the same root? Avraham's faith left him well protected as with a shield, but still open and fruitful enough to be a garden. This is the secret we too seek to learn. So You who taught this secret to our ancestors, who gave them balance between defendedness and openness, be our teacher, too!

אתה נבר לשלם ארני—"You, Powerful One forever, *Adonai*!" The first blessing turned us toward the right side, the *hesed*-flow of divine love. Now, for proper balance, we turn toward the left, the *gevurah*-face of divine power that overwhelms us. We submit to this power, but we derive our strength from it as well. Only in knowing that all power belongs to the One can we come to discover our own true inner strength and use it *leshem yichud*—"in the name of Unity." In doing that we will come to realize that love and power are one at their root in the energy-flow of Y-H-W-H. This is the moment of *חשב*—"for God's love has overpowered us," the joining together of these first two blessings into One.

מוריד חל—"You bring down the dew." But the dew, or so it seems, comes up from the earth, not down from above! So much for the vertical metaphor. We keep it, we love it, but we know it can be stood on its head at any moment. The world is indeed a *dreidel*, as the *rebbe* says. Only because I know that up is down and down is up do I dare continue to speak of "up" and "down" at all!

מגדל חיים חסד—"You sustain the living with *hesed*, give life to the dead with great compassion. The entire blessing is in the present, a series of participles that help us to see the verb behind the noun. *מוקף נטלים* means not only "Supporter of the Fallen" but also "supporting the fallen," showing that the action goes on forever. The same has to be said of "sustaining the living": God continually sustains the living; God is always the sustainer of life. But then the same must be said of *מוריד החיים* as well. Y-H-W-H is forever "giving life to the dead"! The blessing does not refer to a great resurrection of the future, as it is often read, but rather to a

constant ongoing process, one that exists throughout both nature and history, transcending its obvious seeming untruth regarding individual human lives. Yes, death is final, and it is our task to accept that fact. But we need also to see how the dead are born again in the ongoing generations of their families, how human generations are like the seasons of the year, the sprouting of seeds, the cycles of fertilization and pollination, and all the other wonderful intricacies through which life is passed on. Life is far more miraculous than any "mere" resurrection of the dead. In each moment God gives and bestows life in more ways than we can ever imagine. Who are we, Israel, a people reborn in this generation from the ashes of death and destruction, if not one of God's witnesses to this truth?

מַצְמִיחַ יִשְׁוֹעַ—“You cause salvation to grow.” The root usually refers to vegetation. The phrase sounds like: “You make salvation grow like a vegetable.” That’s the way it should be. The Kotsker found a verse that says, “May truth grow from the ground.” Truth won’t come out of heaven, he taught. It rather has to spring up from the earth, deeply rooted in the soil of human experience, concrete earthly reality. The same is true of salvation. For too long we waited for it to float down, fully grown, from the heavens. In our day we have learned that the only bits of salvation we find are the results of our own human labors. It is in the efforts of people to bring about salvation that we also come to see the hidden hand of God, ever working to bring that salvation nearer, through us and within us.

קִדְשׁוֹ קִדְשׁ וְשִׁכְנוֹ קִדְשׁ—“Holy are You, holy Your name, and holy beings each day praise You!” Here left and right have been fully drawn together. Holiness for us is the perfect blending of love and awe. It is a knowing that we stand before the greatest of all terrors, and yet a knowing that causes us to flow with kindness and compassion, with love for all creatures and the One who is their life. Holy is other—transcendent, mighty—but it is no more separate from us than we are from our selves. God is holy, so we say, “Holy are You.” But the human soul is also holy; we are among the “holy beings” who praise God each day. In *kedushah* we have joined ourselves to the chorus of angels. Our holiness and God’s are joined by the holy name, the gift we have been given at the very core of our Torah. This name Y-H-W-H, with all the endless interpretations, permutations, and transformations it bears within it, gives birth to sacred speech, the path we creatures of language must take on our journey homeward to the One.

אֲנִי וְאַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּנִפְתָּר—“Accept, Y-H-W-H our God, Your people Israel and their prayers.” I always find the word *retzeh* in prayer to be a particularly poignant one. It is the imperative of the verb “to want.” “Want us, O Lord!” “Desire us!” Offended by the passionate demand of those

terms, we settle for the quieter “accept.” Here I would like to offer a translation of the entire blessing:

May we, your people Israel and our prayers, be an acceptable offering, Y-H-W-H our God. Restore our banished worship to the innermost chamber of Your house. Accept with love the fire of Israel’s hearts and the prayers upon their lips. Let our worship ever fulfill Your desire and our eyes see Your loving return to Zion. Bless You Y-H-W-H, restoring Your presence to Zion.

יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ—“Our boulder, rock of our life.” The rabbis like to play with *tzur* (“rock”) and *tzayyar* (“artist”). In place of “there is no rock like our God” they read, “There is no artist like our God.” Here, too, God is our rock and our artisan, the One who has fashioned us. But You are also the One who has fashioned us out of Your own rock. Y-H-W-H is both the artist who hews us out of rock and the rock out of which we are hewn. You are All; You are even the Nothing out of which You create us.

עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ מִוִּפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ—“For Your miracles that are with us daily.” Here the concept of “miracle” is renewed and transformed for us. If “miracles” were with us occasionally, we might think the word referred specifically to such triumphs of the “special-effects” department as the plagues in Egypt or the splitting of the Reed Sea. These, as everyone knows, are difficult for us moderns. But “miracles . . . with us daily”? And parallel, in the next phrase, to “goodly wonders, evening, morning, and noon”? These are hardly the suspension of nature; they refer rather to the miraculous qualities of nature itself. We thank God here for such miracles as breathing and seeing, our health and the growth of our children, gifts of love and kindness, and all the rest. Each of these, and every moment in which they exist, is truly the supreme miracle. We thank God mostly for the greatest gift of all: our ability to see the miraculous within the everyday. הַיּוֹם כִּי אֵלֵינוּ—“Good One . . . merciful One.” Again, a new translation:

O good One, whose mercies never end;
O merciful One, whose love is never simple,
We ever hope in You.

But what is that hope in a God whose “love is never simple”? Our hope is the hope of Nachman; our faith is the faith of Job. We trust—but not in a God of easy answers. We hope—but not in a God who intervenes to change life’s course for us. The psalmist said it best long ago: “Blessed is the person who trusts in God; God is the object of his trust.” All we seek of God is God. Such a faith is tested, to be sure, but is never disappointed. וְכָל הַיּוֹם יוֹדֵיךָ מְלֵא—“All of life gives thanks to You.” Together, in a single

great chorus of praise. We humans do not compose the music to this universal symphony; we are only a few of the instruments on which it is played.

סִרְכְּנוּ אֲבוּנוּ כְּלֵנוּ כְּאֶחָד בְּאֶחָד מִכֶּן—“Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance.” God has a shining face; its light is the source of “living Torah, love, kindness, justice, blessing, compassion, life, and peace.” To know any of these in a full way is to see through them to the radiant face of God. To see God’s face is to know them all. The one who has been privileged to catch a glimpse of that shining countenance is called upon forever to live a life that embodies all these godly ways. Then our face, like that of Moses, will come to contain within it something of God’s light. This is *shalom*: the wholeness to be a vessel that contains God’s own light.

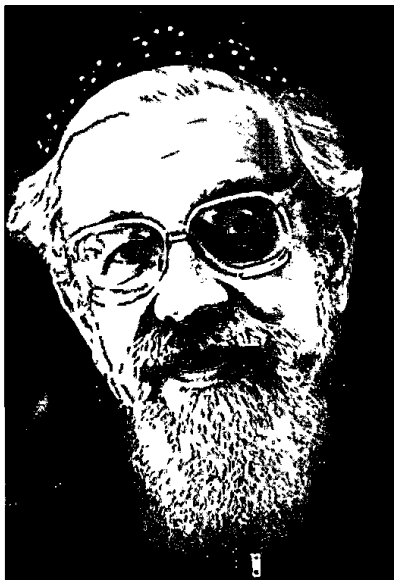
Praying the Amidah: Images and Reflections

Shoshana Devorah

Praying the *Amidah* has been for me a particularly strengthening and rewarding experience. Fortunately, the prayer was introduced to me by a friend who helped imbue each blessing with meaning. Since then, I’ve come to look forward to the insights, recognitions, sensations, and discoveries that accompany regular recitation of the *Amidah* benedictions. I am grateful to those whose teachings have guided and inspired me, and I offer the following very personal reflections on the *Amidah* in hopes of enhancing one’s appreciation of these blessings.

I learned to pray the *Amidah* with the vocalizations of *HaAri*. Thus, each blessing corresponds to one of the *sefirot* of the kabbalistic tree of life, and the name of God in each blessing is visualized with the particular vowel combination pertaining to that *sefirah*. This system, established by *HaAri*, can often be found in Sephardic prayer books, in which the *yud heh vav heh* name of God at the end of each blessing (*barukh atah HaShem*) is printed with the vowels of the *sefirah* linked to that blessing.

Without understanding how *HaAri* came to associate specific vowels with specific *sefirot*, or specific blessings with specific *sefirot*, I have found the application of his system to be quite evocative. Thus, while focusing on



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