

# God, Prayer, and Religious Language

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I begin this discussion of prayer and its future with an article of faith, the faith of a religious humanist. The human need to pray is universal and constant. Even in our seemingly secular age, worship exists in one form or another throughout the world—in all of the traditional cultures and in many garbs within contemporary culture, even by those who would deny engaging in it. The prophet's statement that "in every place incense and sacrifice are offered in My name" (Mal. 1:11) indeed describes the human situation. The need to pray exists prior to any particular theology or definition of God. In fact, theology is a response of intellect to the reality of the need to pray and an attempt to rationalize it. It is the mind's articulation of truth the heart already knows.

The need to worship covers a wide range of human moods and life experiences. It includes the fullness of heart experienced by Jews in the songs of Kabbalat Shabbat as well as the moments of dread and awe conveyed to us in the liturgy of Yom Kippur. Exultation and awe, joy and terror dwell together in prayer, the tune to which we dance on this knife point called human existence. The "valley of death's shadow" ever remains an important part of the human experience; it too plays a role in our need for prayer. The individual confrontation with mortality is heightened in our day by a collective sense of potential danger, making this an age in which the role of prayer is increased rather than diminished.

As we are the first generations to grow up aware of the imminent possibility of universal destruction by the human hand, the consciousness of mortality that colors our prayer-life has taken on a universal hue. For all the continued growth of human knowledge in biomedical and other scientific areas, the sense that the keys to both life and death lie in hands that reach beyond human understanding or control has not been lost. Now as the greatest of human fears shifts from that of nuclear holocaust to that of ecological devastation (a shift that has taken place before our eyes), the sense of divine involvement in the fate of the world will grow. The longing to assert some ultimate meaning to our commitment to the

preservation of life on our planet will become the most essential task of religion, even among those who are not “believers” in the traditional Western sense of that term. It is not only those who believe in a simplistic version of a God who “hears” or “answers” who need to pray in an age like ours.

It seems appropriate, as we discuss the future of Judaism in the early to mid-21st century, first to offer some thoughts on what the world as a whole will look like at that quickly approaching time in human history. Of course this imaginative construction can only be derived from the present situation and leaves aside the distinct possibility of some new calamity or transforming historic event that cannot be predicted. The world I describe here is as I think it is most likely to appear based on current evidence and trends. It is not entirely the world as I wish to see it, but rather the world as I expect it will be, including the good, the bad, and the terrifying.

The great international conflict between East and West that so dominated later 20th-century history is already a receding memory. By the mid-21st century, the great powers of the day (United Europe, a now vanished Soviet Union, China, Japan, and the United States) will be close to a state of full *détente*—in effect, world government. This will have come about not because of the advent of Messiah or any dramatic change in the nature of the human heart, but rather because of an overwhelming realization that the planet as a whole so imminently faces destruction and the end of human habitability that only the combined efforts of all nations will allow for the earth’s survival. The terror wrought by the rise in global temperature, the frightening rate at which the earth’s ozone shield will have been depleted, the imminent destruction of forest reserves, and the near-irreversible pollution of air and seas will force upon humanity an unprecedented degree of unity. It will be clear that the great patchwork of private, corporate, and national practice in relation to the environment has led to a disregard and flouting of warnings that the human community simply is not able to tolerate. This realization will bring about tremendous changes in human history and the world’s political structure, the United Nations giving way to a stronger body, but one dominated by an entente of major powers. Membership in this community of nations will be essential for the survival of any individual nation-state. The vital nature of such membership will be enforced both by economic and military threat. At least for a time, the greater weapon that will stand as the club behind a new principle of organization will be the economic one. There will be cases of near expulsions from the community of nations: perhaps Brazil for not controlling the burning of Amazon forests; Burma for not bringing an end to the growing of poppies in the Golden Triangle; the United States for not levying sufficiently severe punishments on industrial giants that conspire to circumvent environmental regulations. Such expulsion from the international community would mean a degree of total economic isolation that no nation would be able to withstand.

The first half of the 21st century will be the time when humanity is forced to take seriously the paucity of earth's natural resources and the need to transform human society so that it begins to live within the bounds of those resources. This will involve strict international controls of resource use, as I have said, within the context of a single world economic order. It will also have to involve a universal and tightly enforced commitment to population control. It will be widely accepted, in all circles other than those of certain religious fundamentalists, that unless world population growth is severely limited, all attempts to maintain standards of quality for human life within the bounds of preservation of resources will be doomed. Earth can remain livable for future generations, it will be realized, only if the numbers of those generations do not get out of hand.

We now turn to the place of religion in this emerging society of the mid-21st century. The most important development on the religious front will involve the growth of a series of semiscientific new religious groups based on meditation and other disciplines of consciousness control, exhibiting both the best and worst uses of such powers. These will be officially encouraged by various regimes as offering the benefit of leading their adherents toward life at a slower pace, a major goal of an environment-conscious world that wants to slow growth in every area. In these groups and in some of the ongoing traditional religious communities, borders between East and West will continue to diminish. As travel becomes increasingly easy and the world grows smaller, Christian-Zen retreat centers in both Eastern and Western settings will be common. Yoga classes taught in churches and synagogues will surprise no one. Christianity itself may be somewhat diminished as a force in world affairs. The evangelicals, after the great sweep of millennial revivalism at the turn of the new century, will come up looking and feeling somewhat empty on its other side. Liberal churches will be fully absorbed in decrying resource abuse and in supporting world federalism, identifying both with the promised desolations and glories of biblical tradition. The Catholic church is likely to be significantly divided and battered. Some quarters within the church will continue to be among the most progressive in support of ecological concerns, just distribution of resources, and the governmental structures needed to maintain them. Catholic traditionalism, however, will be significantly discredited as the Vatican is forced by international pressures to renounce its opposition to birth control, a position the world community will not be able to tolerate from such a major force in world affairs. A significant minority of the church will refuse to submit to this ban, and Catholicism will suffer the consequences.

I fear that Judaism in the generation of which I speak will be represented in the world by two rival claimants, whose polemical and adversarial relationship will already have a history. These two groups, the Orthodox and the combined liberals, will continue to be bound together by certain common concerns, especially those involving a prejudice by bigots who continue to make no distinction between them. Ties of family and personal friendship will also help to prevent a

total break. But traditionalists will live under rather sharp public scrutiny, as will those other traditionalist religious groups associated with attitudes harmful to the societal order, including both protracted antagonism toward others and violation of birth control legislation. This traditionalist Jewish group will itself remain very much divided, and a great deal of its strength will be spent on internal conflict. It will, however, live with a sense of strength and pride, augmented by its self-perceived position as a persecuted minority.

The nontraditionalists, or liberal group of Jews, will continue to be viewed as a religious community in North America and mostly as a cultural/ethnic entity in Israel and Europe. The links between American, European, and Israeli nontraditionalist Jews will be strengthened. All of these groups will have been deeply shaken by the internationally imposed settlement of the Israeli/Arab conflict. Questions regarding the meaning of Jewish existence, the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism, and the validity of religious and national separatism in an age of such great international striving for unity will also be very much alive in their midst. At the same time, these communities will continue to enjoy a modest revival, mostly affecting small circles of the most committed, with regard to religious observance, historical study of Judaism, and cultural creativity.

Our interest here is in the religious life of that community, and especially in the religious language and liturgical forms that will be current in it. By their very nature, religious language and liturgy are highly conservative vehicles of a group's collective self-expression. They serve as ways for a community to verbalize the link both between its present-day adherents and their historical past, and between the ordinary human being and eternity itself. As such, the liturgical text needs to give the worshipper the feeling that it is deeply rooted, ancient, and unchanging. It is for this reason that liturgy tends to take on a quasi-scriptural status in religious communities. Though liturgy is not quite canonical in the formal sense, change in it takes place with great hesitation and amid tremendous controversy. The reaction to the liturgical changes of Vatican II, the great conflicts around 19th-century Jewish Reform liturgy in Germany, and the public burning of the first Reconstructionist prayerbook are all cases in point. There is little that distresses religious traditionalists as much as a threatened change in their beloved forms of liturgical expression.

But now we have to turn to the heart of the matter. What will the act of prayer and the use of religious language mean to this group of Jews in the century to come? Let me begin with two comments on prayer in the contemporary American Jewish setting. Jewish life in this century has given a disproportional prominence to public worship while undercutting its private and personal core. The notion of "synagogue-centered Judaism" was once loudly touted by the Conservative and Reform movements, along with "synagogue attendance," as the pollsters' measure of Jewish loyalty, and there were attempts to fit Judaism into standards of behavior and measurement appropriate to the American Protestant world. By the end of the 20th century, more sophisticated religious lead-

ers and social scientists have come to understand that other measures of Jewish loyalty are at least as appropriate as attendance at worship services.

But at the same time that public worship was so elevated in importance, it may be said that true prayer (from the devotional point of view)—the art of opening the heart to God, the pouring out of both joy and anguish before the One who created the world—has suffered a tremendous decline. Part of this has to do with the general secularization of culture and lack of clarity about religious matters. Before whom does one pray? Is there a God who hears? Does prayer change anything? If not, does it make any sense? This authentic theological doubt and confusion combines with a typically modern impatience and unwillingness to give time to the cultivation of inward skills. The pace at which moderns have been trained to live makes such prayer seem nearly impossible, even for the would-be faithful. The fact that traditional Jewish worship involves the mumbling of a great many words at a rapid speed does little to enhance its status as a valid way of prayer in an age that needs to slow down radically its pace of living. No wonder that Eastern—or Quaker—modes of silent prayer or meditation seem more attractive and “meaningful” than those of Judaism. How can the novice ever learn *kavvanah* when there is so much to be said, and at so rapid a pace?

I feel that Jews in the generations of which we speak will know little of the real act of prayer, and their mostly negative associations, either with traditionalist rapid mumbling or with the formalism of the large liberal synagogue, will continue to serve as roadblocks. Only rabbis in smaller congregations and groups of Jews in informal *havurot* will be able to make accessible to Jews outside Orthodoxy a sense that prayer, including liturgy, needs to be the most spontaneous and least routinized of human activities. The popularity of such leaders and groups will be great, and not only among the young. One of the great challenges of Jewish religious leadership, and therefore of theological education in our own time, is the ability to convey the importance of prayer as an essential human and humanizing act. If religious language is going to survive among our descendants, we will have to give it new meaning. As Jews stand farther than we can imagine from the great well of emotional power that prayer had for our pre-modern and mostly East European ancestors, we will have to find new and creative ways to reinfuse it with energy.

*While experimentation is certainly called for, a sense of authenticity and deep-rootedness in tradition will remain the greatest bearer of that power and should not be sacrificed.* For all the changes in prayer and religious language that will take place as we enter a new age in Jewish history, we must never lose sight of the fact that the deeper task of religion is common to all ages and indeed to all humans. In the life of prayer we seek to create a constant awareness of the divinity that surrounds us at all times. We live in the divine presence as did our ancestors and as will our descendants. Prayer offers to the individual and the community something of an echo of eternity, and that single echo is borne by the



multiple echoes of history and antiquity. This is why I believe the Hebrew language will remain a vital vehicle in the prayer life of the Jewish community. No translation bears for the Jewish soul even a faint reverberation of the tremendous power contained in the Hebrew liturgical text. We cannot allow the power contained in that ancient and much loved text to be lost. The way that text is understood, however, is already changing and will continue to change radically. It is a new understanding of the *act* of prayer—more than a new prayer text—that is needed by contemporary Jews.

If there is to be a link between authentic Jewish prayer of the past and the new understanding of prayer in the era of which I speak, such a link will be best provided by the sources of Hasidism. I have been under the spell of these texts for many years now; they have “saved” the value of prayer for me as I have come to terms with my own disbelief on a literal level. I have tried to collect some of the most important of these sources, with brief comment, in *Your Word Is Fire* (together with Barry W. Holtz). Perhaps the most important single line for me is the statement attributed to Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz, a contemporary of the Ba'al Shem Tov: “People think that you pray to God,” he said, “but that is not the case. Rather prayer itself is of the essence of Divinity.” Much of what I have to say on prayer can be viewed as a commentary on this line.

For us post-Freudians and post-Jungians, the human being is not a simple conscious self, for whom the act of prayer would be a calling out to a “wholly Other,” who then might or might not be said to exist, listen, and respond. Our notion of prayer is more complex, as our notion of person is more complex. We see consciousness as having multiple levels. The great labyrinth of the mind, including the emotions, is perhaps the most magnificent of those creations for which we express thanks in prayer. In thanking God each morning for “establishing the land over the sea,” we symbolically recognize that waking consciousness is a thin and sometimes precarious veneer over a deep and churning unconscious life. We see in prayer an important avenue in which the deeper pre-conscious self calls out to the conscious mind for verbal expression. Our most ancient and primitive joys and fears, including thankfulness for being alive and terror of night, are permitted expression in the language of prayer. We need look only at our daily evening service, ranging in emotion from *ha-ma'ariv 'aravim* to *hashkivenu* to see how much of the human emotional range is captured by our liturgical language. In prayer the hidden child within us breaks through the repressing bonds of adult conscious control, which does not allow for the spontaneity and wide variety of emotion that the child in us yet needs to express.

As we reach ever deeper into the human mind to call forth the most profound—and vulnerable—parts of ourselves, we occasionally find ourselves standing before moments of great mystery or transcendence. The inner depths called forth in our prayer seem to be without end or limit. Sometimes the voice that speaks—or the silence that resounds—within us seems clearly to be not of our own making.

It is the source of such inner moments that we identify as God. But this God is hardly the wholly Other or the radically transcendent Being of conventional Western theism. On the contrary, this reality is so tied to our deepest inner self that we feel false in seeking to disengage this intimate connection. We seem to know God best at the place where self and Self can no longer be distinguished: the eternal One as manifest in the individual human soul. Prayer is a reaching forth of the individual conscious self toward the universal Self that lies within us, and at the same time the striving of that innermost One for expression at the surface of consciousness, which can be provided only by individual humans and human community. I believe this sort of religious humanism (I use the term as did Martin Buber) is not too great a distortion of Rabbi Pinhas's message.

For us, as for the Hasidic author, that dual process of our seeking the divine and the divine speaking through us is the sacred process. The faith that sustains our commitment to this process is in no way separable from our belief in the nobility of the human spirit. The human and the divine meet in an inward encounter in which the I/Thou may even be transcended, though the spiritual modesty dictated by Jewish language stops short of describing that ultimate mystical union of self and Self. Such a faith describes a God who is not radically other than either soul or world. We believe in a continuum of consciousness and in a divinity that stands as the inner essence of all existence, present throughout being insofar as we are open to discovering and responding to that presence. Divinity is accessible to us through a contemplative inner ascent or an exercise in the development of human consciousness. Human consciousness serves as a unique channel for that which lies within to achieve expression. Prayer is both our seeking out of this divinity and the "attempt" of that divinity to "respond" by speaking through us. It is the reality of God that we come to know in the heights and depths of prayer and contemplation that will become the basis of our future theological conversation.

Prayer is the most private of all human acts, needing to traverse intimate and emotionally vulnerable territory within the human self. At the same time, it is a universally shared human activity, one that surpasses all boundaries of language, culture, and even theology. To say it again in language influenced by Hasidism, prayer is the process by which the spark of divine light within each of us seeks out other sparks, the lights within all creation, and joins with them in the return to the one great source of light. In the course of this journey, the seeking out of those sparks that reside in other human souls, especially members of that soul family who speak the same religious language, becomes appropriate. For us Jews, prayer at its most personally profound and the activity of communal prayer should not be seen as conflicting with one another. Prayer in community should involve a reaching out to the soul of the other and a joining together as a community of human souls together reaches toward God.

In order to perform the "horizontal" aspect of such reaching, I must come to know the other. Shared prayer without shared caring makes no sense. The

prayer community, therefore, should ideally be small and rather intimate, and must exist in the context of a supportive and caring community. This is why I have long been involved in the *havurah* movement and have been an advocate of the small synagogue or *minyán* as an alternative to the formal and depersonalized prayer act as performed in most American liberal synagogues. I continue to be a firm believer in this position and in its growing acceptance among Jews in the coming century.

It is at this place also that prayer is joined to that which too often in our world is confined to the separate realm of social action. How can I pray with another human being if I do not know the needs of that other? What does it mean to pray together if I do not have the consent of the others with whom I pray? But the other may say to me in the course of this process, "Care about me first as a person! Cease oppressing me or merely 'using' me as a member of your religious community. Help me be free enough to join in this search in my own way." Ultimately, we realize that we are joined in such a prayer community to all of Israel and then to all of humanity. Since the light of each and every soul is needed for the ultimate restoration of the One great light, there is no escaping the real life demands that being a person of prayer makes upon us. There is no authentic praying without a life of doing. Prayer and action are completely united with one another, and for many, action itself will speak as the loudest and most authentic testimony of prayer.

I will not attempt to describe any further the nature of the single light that is formed in this great collective act of inner reaching. The One that is both source and product of human unity remains beyond description. It is the transcendence pointed to by our collective human experiences of divine immanence, but its nature remains mysterious. It is the question that remains after all our answers. It is Y-H-W-H: the One whose only name is nothing other than "breath" or "Being." Ultimately Buber is right in saying that this One can be spoken *to* more readily than it can be spoken *of*. But I have also tried to say here that this "speaking to" is not that which it at first appears to be.

Since this view of prayer is clearly tied to a God concept that reaches far beyond the god-as-person images of our traditional liturgy, some words must be said about the reason for maintaining such language, and even a verbal (as distinct from silent meditational) form of prayer altogether. If what we seek is contact with the deepest Self within, why not turn in our verbal prayer for a series of contemplative exercises? Clearly, the God of which I speak here is not the super-person of biblical and rabbinic tradition. The old rabbinic God concept, still so familiar to us in our ancient prayer book, was already refined and transformed many centuries ago by the legacies of both Jewish philosophy and mysticism. It is clear, even to the relatively casual student of Jewish intellectual history, that neither great Moses of medieval Jewry—neither Maimonides nor De Leon, the author of the *Zohar*—was a literal believer in the old rabbinic concept of God. True, they allowed the liturgy to remain mostly intact, and it seems



that they were content enough that the masses continued to believe in a rather anthropomorphic deity. The intellectual elitists of both camps believed that enlightenment as they taught it was simply not appropriate to the mental capacities of most people. They lived in an age of faith, and their departures from conventional piety, as important as they were, left most of the society intact.

The situation in modernity is entirely different. In a secular age, in which only a minority struggle for faith altogether, religion has to be presented in the most sophisticated manner possible. Ours is an age marked not only by secularism, but by a Jewish community of unparalleled general educational sophistication, coupled with abysmal Jewish ignorance. Only a Judaism that is presented in the most sophisticated terms will appeal to a community such as our own. Jewish leaders, and particularly rabbis in recent decades, have frequently been guilty of underestimating the spiritual sophistication of seeking Jews, leaving would-be devotees out in the cold insofar as positive affiliation with Judaism is concerned. In an age such as this, it is important to say openly that the God of which we speak is not in essence a person or a willful, personified being. The turn to God is for us a turn inward to the core of ourselves and the core of all being, a recognition by the individual human consciousness that it is but a surface expression of a deeper underlying reality that is expressed through every other human mind and voice as well.

Why then do we continue to use personal metaphors in prayer? If we recognize that the personhood of God is a human projection onto a faceless core of being, why do we continue to pray as though we were addressing that projection? Is this, in fact, not praying before the mirror? Are we not worshipping the human rather than the true divine in such prayer?

The answers to these questions are manifold and not simple. In this matter too I turn to Hasidism for guidance, and here I am an advocate of the Bratslav Hasidic school as opposed to the very different teachings of the Habad (Lubavitch) school, which is indeed more contemplative in focus. I believe that prayer is about intimacy. The way into the core of being is only through our most pained and personal selves. In the search for the great inner One there is no detour around individual inwardness. Self-confrontation is crucial to the act of prayer. Indeed, the root of the word used for prayer in Hebrew, *tefillah*, probably is derived from a source that means "self-judgment." To whom do we open our most intimate selves if not to another person? With whom do we think we can talk about what pains us? With whom can we share our joys, our loves, our doubts, and our fears, if not another person? While Buber may have considered it possible to have an I/Thou relationship with a tree, for most of us intimacy and the interpersonal go hand-in-hand.

The understanding that projection plays a key role in our theological imagination, so central to the modern understanding of religion since Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Freud, is not original to these moderns. Maimonides's claim that prophecy contained a perfect mixture of intellect and imagination already points

in this direction. The Kabbalists refer to this insight in their distinction between *ein sof*, the boundless, undefined, and essentially impersonal divine reality, and the *sefirot*, which may be called the masks of God. But even before the new intellectual refinements of the Middle Ages, the rabbis knew that our images of God were projections brought about by human need. The midrash claims that there are two great moments when Israel actually saw the divine form. At the crossing of the Red Sea, they saw God as a young lover and hero. At Sinai they saw God as an elderly law giver and judge. Each revelation was in accord with the need of the hour. In the day of battle, a frail, elderly God could hardly be the right vision for the moment. On the Day of Judgment, no one could be satisfied with a God who looked any less distinguished than the jurists of the day, "the elders who sit at the gate." What is this midrash if not a primitive understanding of projection? A particularly startling Hasidic interpretation of the Prophet Ezekiel's vision says that "the figure with the appearance of a man" who sits on the divine throne that Ezekiel saw is there only because we place him there.

None of this is to say, of course, that divinity is not real or that religion is "just made up." Quite the contrary. It is because religion is so real and addresses the human spirit at such great depth that we are forced to turn into ourselves and bring forth the most profound creations of the human spirit as reflecting mirrors with which to catch the divine light. All the prophets but Moses, say our sages, prophesied "through a darkened glass," which really means through a mirror. One interpretation of prophecy, quoted in the name of an ancient midrash, says that the seeker is like an animal wandering through the forest who suddenly comes upon a pond. He looks down into the pond and thinks he sees another. That other is his reflection, of course, but in seeing himself projected outward in the form of another, he is allowed to see himself for the first time.

Religion, and particularly the act of prayer, requires personification. We who want both to sing to the universe of our love of life and to cry out to it in anger, protest, and pain, need to paint that universe as having a human face. It is that human face or that human ear, which we experience as the other, that sees us, listens to us, and receives our prayer.

The divinity that we believe lies within and throughout the natural world seeks through us to be discovered and raised to consciousness. Thus it becomes the inspiration for the lives we lead in its presence. This is the very essence of our religious faith, based on longings and intimations of truth that well up from deep within us. In this process, consciousness plays a crucial role. For us to say that God is less than conscious, to say that only we have consciousness and there is no mind higher than our own, would betray both faith and experience. Those who have been granted some glimpse of the infinite rungs of consciousness know how narrow the perspective of the ordinary human mind can be. We thus may speak of God as the mind of the universe, or as cosmic consciousness. But

our verbal description of God as conscious should not lead us to forget that even this is an inadequate expression of what we really seek to say. God as consciousness is not the same as God as person.

There is no religious language other than that of metaphor and symbol. The danger of our tradition is that we are too much wedded to a single form of metaphoric expression. That picture of God, the loving, yet judging, male elder seated on the throne, leaves us too little variety of metaphoric play and too easily veers into idolatry. One of the most important lessons we learn from the Kabbalah is its insistence upon a multiplicity of spiritual metaphors. In one moment God may be that elder, but in the next, the divine is young woman, flowing spring, great sea, Temple, moon, lover, other and even destroyer. The mixing of personal and nonpersonal metaphors is helpful here, as is the significant mixing of feminine with masculine religious metaphors, especially in a literature until now created almost entirely by men. It would be helpful for us today not to seek to do away with traditional religious language, but to add to it within this great multiplicity of metaphors. Particularly as women are enfranchised in Jewish life, it is clear that new prayers using female metaphors will become a more accepted part of Judaism. Some of these may well be based upon imagery used in the Kabbalah (to me, a welcome change). The mixing of personal and impersonal metaphors, as well as symbols taken from nature with those taken from Torah and tradition, will serve to enrich Judaism, as did the Kabbalah of the Middle Ages. To be sure, there are dangers in such an approach, and there may be points at which boundaries have to be set, particularly insofar as the preservation of Judaism's distinctiveness is concerned. But we would do well to encourage more rather than less spiritual and liturgical creativity as we face a new age in Jewish history.

As we move toward the growth of new religious language, I would like to say something in particular for the traditional "father figure" God of Jewish liturgy, one that I think must be preserved (along with other images) for important psychological reasons. I believe that the mostly loving and compassionate Father/King of this liturgy represents a tempering of the wild and warlike deities who preceded the God of Israel and are still reflected in some parts of the Hebrew Bible. This taming of the ancient warring gods, and then the "conversion" of the desert God into the deity of rabbinic religion, is a totemic representation of the taming of human (and particularly male) anger and violence, a representation of the need for sublimation of our inner violence and hostile feelings. As psychologist David Bakan has noted, the rabbinic father, projected as "our Father, compassionate Father, compassionate One, have mercy upon us" is really father turned into mother. "He" has taken on some of the classic archetypal characteristics of "she." This process of reducing the radical difference between "male" and "female" in the God figure should be treated with some seriousness and care. We should be cautious of a situation in which proposed

feminine god language or god figures alongside the masculine lead to a polarization wherein the "male" figure is pushed back into those negative "masculine" characteristics that Judaism has so long labored to transform.

Our archetypes need to remain complex and richly textured. Just as "mother" should not be all love and compassion, but should have elements of judgment and power as well, so should "father," the projected male totem of our Jewish society, combine elements of rule and compassion. I do not suggest that there is an easy or automatic solution to this problem, nor can living symbols be entirely molded to suit any generation's idea of correctness or propriety.

I also think it is important to speak openly about the essential character of the second-person usage in Jewish worship. In order for prayer to be real, it has to call forth, according to the greatest Jewish masters in this art, both love and awe. For prayer to be effective, these two at their greatest heights must join together; the words in fact serve primarily to evoke these emotions. (Prayer without love and awe "has no wings," say the Hasidic masters, "and cannot fly upward.") I believe that the need for love and awe in worship requires the use of the second person. I do not tremble when I say "I love nature" or "there is a beautiful tree." I do tremble when I say to another "I love you." Here, too, Martin Buber is crucial to our discussion. The saying of "you," he claims, makes a claim on my whole being that no third person or cohortative first person can make. In saying "you" in prayer, I open myself and make myself vulnerable. Without that vulnerability—that laying oneself open before the other present in the saying of "you" (even though we understand that the "you" is not ultimately other)—we cannot enter the emotional state needed to pray.

I thus believe that insofar as liberal Judaism maintains a liturgy into the next century, it will and should remain an essentially traditional, Hebrew-centered liturgy. But there will be some important changes and additions to that liturgy. The past two centuries have already provided precedent for ongoing, relatively moderate changes in the liturgical text. Though some Orthodox leaders fulminated with rage on each occasion, such changes continued. Even a return to greater tradition in liturgy, notable in the recent efforts of all three liberal movements, has not and will not eliminate the desire for certain carefully thought out departures from tradition. There are two areas where I believe current circumstances will affect the religious language of Judaism in the mid-21st century: the issues of ecological survival and of nationalism/universalism.

The importance of ecological concern will lead Judaism back to a largely creation-centered theology. Jewish theology foundered through the 20th century on the twin rocks of revelation and providence. Accepting Franz Rosenzweig's formulation of Judaism as the religion of revelation par excellence, Jewish thinkers struggled endlessly with the question of what remains of the Word of God after the ravages of critical Bible scholarship, comparative ancient Near Eastern religion, and literary form studies as applied to scripture. Thinly veiled

behind the great concern with revelation was the issue of authority, particularly the authority of religious law. Though these two did not necessarily have to go hand-in-hand with one another, it was generally claimed that only a rather literal belief in scripture as the revealed will of God would suffice to justify the institutions of Jewish law.

The question of providence was forced upon Jewish theology by the terrible events of mid-century. As naive a formulation as it may be, the question "where was God?" has continued to haunt the would-be Jewish faithful for several generations. As the 20th century draws to a close, however, the balance seems to be shifting toward a theology of creation, in recent years an issue mostly neglected by nonfundamentalist Jews. The essence of religion is now seen to lie in a profound openness to a divine presence within the natural order, an appreciation of God as the One who "renews each day the act of creation." Awareness of divine presence and willingness to act upon that awareness and construct a life and society appreciative of the universe as God's handiwork seem to comprise the sort of religious attitude appropriate to the turn of the new century, given the picture of that century's chief concerns as outlined above.

Here the insights of the 20th century's greatest Jewish thinkers begin to combine in surprising new ways. Martin Buber's idealized reconstruction of Hasidism, focused on awareness of the divine presence in each "here and now," and Abraham Joshua Heschel's emphasis on a profound sense of mystery and wonder about existence as the starting point of religion, will be joined with Mordecai M. Kaplan's insistence on a this-worldly and intellectually honest Jewish faith. These together will produce a Judaism at once driven by the excitement of spiritual quest and focused on the natural order, its existence and sustenance, as the great testimony of God's presence.

This new creation-centered Judaism does not take the biblical creation story literally, but rather uses it as symbolic expression either of a highly immanentist theology, in which talk of creation stands for the holiness of all existence, or a somewhat vague theism/religious humanism, which emphasizes the notions of human stewardship over and responsibility for the created world. It is, for the sake of clarification, completely alien both in origin and spirit to so-called Creationism, a rear guard attempt to support biblical literalism current in Christian fundamentalist circles. This new Jewish emphasis on creation is, in a certain sense, a return to Maimonides, who well understood that Jewish theology had to address itself to universal questions of human existence, and that foremost among these is the act of creation. While we are far from the medieval need to "prove" creation from the laws of physics, we share with this mentor an awareness that life's meaning and life's origins are tied to one another.

The universal quest for human meaning usually begins with the most personal and this-worldly of questions: "Who am I?" "What is the purpose of my life?" The most essential Jewish answers to these questions are rooted in our shared account of creation: "You are the image and likeness of God, put into this



world to continue the ongoing sublime act of divine creation. In your use of speech, you may imitate the speech-acts of God in creating the world. In reflection and sanctification of time, you repeat the primal Sabbath. In making life holy and in the moral improvement of the universe, you are ever completing the unfinished act of creation. As a creature of intelligence, freedom, and moral choice, the way is open before you—for life or death, destruction or creativity.’’ This message will be one of tremendously increased religious power as the world faces a time of crucial decisions and potential disaster.

A second area in which external history is likely to impinge on Jewish religious language is the age-old conflict in Jewry between universalism and particularism. Liberal Jews toward the mid-21st century will be driven by a great conflict: internationalist in sympathies, most will support a strong world government and recognize how deeply life in the new threatened “global village” needs to be transformed to assure a future for human society. They will be cultural cosmopolitans, enjoying the full benefits of the blending of cultures that will have resulted from the breakdown of international borders and speedy and accessible global travel. In their musical and artistic tastes, they will remain largely linked with the internationalist avant-garde. These Jews will have suffered more than a generation of embarrassment over the nationalism and the Israelocentrism of their own tradition and of their compatriots, the Jewish traditionalists. Though most will remain supportive of Israel throughout its protracted and morally difficult struggle to retain independence and political/military hegemony in the Middle East, they will be deeply torn and embarrassed about this as well. At the same time, the drive to maintain a unique Jewish identity and preserve the Jewish heritage will not be abated. North American Jews, the great-great- or great-great-great grandchildren of immigrants, most of whom live highly assimilated and comfortable lives, will continue to pay more than monetary dues and lip service to the idea of preserving Judaism.

This inward conflict will be reflected in extended experimentation with Jewish liturgy. Some texts within the prayer book, rooted in Reform tradition and eschewing national aspirations, will again become popular, having largely disappeared with the Reform move to the right in the late 20th century. Such formulae as “make peace for us and for all Israel” will have given way in such liturgies to universalist formulations. References to Israel as “the chosen people” will be absent from such prayer books, which will consider the Reconstructionist liturgy of 1945 as a progressive vanguard statement.

On the other hand, prayer books will also be sought that affirm the national identity of the Jewish people and its ties with the State of Israel. Inclusion or noninclusion of a prayer for the State of Israel may be something of a touchstone on this question. It will be important for some Jews that the prayer book affirm liberal Jews’ unity with nonsynagogue Jews and communities. In these prayer books an important place will be given to modern Hebrew poetry in translation, along with other creative contributions of modern Jews. Evidence of the con-

tinuing historical struggle of the Jewish people for survival and recognition will make such a liturgy imperative. Unlike the more classically Reform prayer books, here references to the land, to Jerusalem, and even historic references to the priesthood and the Davidic dynasty will be restored under the influence of the need for greater connection to Jewish history. Some Jews will come to appreciate their liturgy as a testament to the evolving character of Jewish civilization, bearing within it traces of each period through which the people have lived. Liturgical affirmations of the messianic future in particular will grow in importance as Jews take their place as an active part of a society that works to avoid a new apocalyptic doomsday. Within the liberal Jewish community, controversy will continue over liturgical change and several versions of the prayer book will remain current, even as the old denominational labels shift in meaning.

In the face of these two great issues, I believe that the liturgical crisis of the 1980s—the questions of gender—will be seen with a good deal of historical perspective. The hysteria on all sides generated by the empowerment of women in the Jewish community will be a thing of the past, and the playing out of that hysteria on the board of liturgy will be the subject of interesting historical and sociological research. Jewish worshippers (men and women) will be able to say *barukh atah* again without having to feel embarrassed before real or imagined feminist critics. Inclusion of references to the matriarchs in the prayer book, *kavvanot* addressed to the *shekhinah*, and new prayers invoking the spirit of Rachel, Miriam, or Hannah will be commonplace and widely accepted by both men and women. Nonsexist translations will be *de rigueur*, but the hypersensitivity of our own decade to the gender question will have gone by the wayside.

In all of these matters, I believe a wide variety of prayer styles should be legitimized in the Jewish community. As we collectively grope toward the religious language appropriate for a new age in our people's history, a century in which "a thousand flowers bloom" is not at all a terrifying prospect to me. Jewish law, insofar as it remains a significant guide in this area, is rather open with regard to what is truly required in prayer. Maimonides concludes that the recital of the *Shema* and the spontaneous prayer of the heart are biblically ordained obligations and that all other liturgy has the lesser status of rabbinic ordinance. I could readily conceive of a Jewish community in our age in which twice-daily prayer, at sunrise and sunset, consisted of a period of meditation to be concluded with a communal calling out of the one line *Shema*. That is a synagogue I would like to attend sometimes, though I would also like to go to one where there is still *davnen*, for another kind of spiritual nourishment. The synagogue that offers thoughtful new prayers, including some that reflect the cosmological and scientific language of our time, converted into worshipful appreciation, is also one I would like to visit sometimes. A congregation that experiments with some of the new forms of meditation and spiritual growth techniques that will abound in the 21st century, seeking to bind them to the earlier sources of Jewish

spirituality, will also have a real contribution to make. I continue to believe and hope that all of these, along with a good many others, will survive in our liberal Jewish community as we face the challenge of an unknown, sometimes frightening, but ever exciting new age in our people's history.

Imagining the Jewish Future  
Essays and Responses

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