

Between *Keva* and *Kavanah*

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1. R. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Spirit of Jewish Prayer, (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity)*, pp. 100-101

Our services are conducted with pomp and precision. The rendition of the liturgy is smooth. Everything is present: decorum, voice, ceremony. But one thing is missing: *life*. One knows in advance what will ensue. There will be no surprise, no adventure of the soul; there will be no sudden burst of devotion. Nothing is going to happen to the soul. Nothing unpredictable must happen to the person who prays. He will attain no insight into the words he reads; he will attain no new perspective for the life he lives. Our motto is monotony. What was will be, and there is nothing new in the synagogue. The fire has gone out of our worship. It is cold, stiff, and dead. Inorganic Judaism. True, things are happening; of course, not within prayer, but within the administration of the synagogues. Do we not establish new edifices all over the country?

Yes the edifices are growing. Yet worship is decaying.

Has the synagogue become the graveyard where prayer is buried? Are we, the spiritual leaders of American Jewry, members of a burial society? There are many who labor in the vineyard of oratory; but who knows how to pray, or how to inspire other to pray? There are many who can execute and display magnificent fireworks. But who knows how to kindle a spark in the darkness of a soul?

2. R. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Spirit of Jewish Prayer (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity)*, p. 111

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 text. On the other hand, prayer is worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of devotion. Thus, Jewish prayer is guided by two opposite principles: order and outburst, regularity and spontaneity, uniformity and individuality, law and freedom. These principles are the two poles about which Jewish prayer revolves. Since each of the two moves in the opposite direction, equilibrium can be maintained only 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 devotion. It is a problem that concerns not only prayer but the whole sphere of Jewish observance. He who is not aware of this central difficulty is a simpleton; he who offers a simple solution is a quack.

3. Joseph Tabory, *The Conflict of Halakhah and Prayer*, pp. 17 (Tradition, vol. 25, 1, 1989)

It has been suggested that a central theme in many *halakhot* is the idea of a circumscription and definition; the law creates order out of chaos and keeps the Jew in the world of order and out of chaos.

How different is the world of prayer! Prayer has been called by the rabbis "the service of the heart." Prayer arises from the heart rather than from the mind, from a heart full of emotion which knows no rational restrictions. Jewish prayer has been described by a master of Jewish law, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, as arising from a heart which beats "rapidly and with an irregular rhythm," a heart which is "wild, savage and primitive." How can the world of *halakhah*, the world of such law and order, attempt to regular something which is by its very nature free and wild? It seems that such an attempt would tend to change the essence of prayer and transmute it into a "commandment of men, learned by rote" (Isaiah, 29:13)

4. Joseph Tabory, *The Conflict of Halakhah and Prayer*, pp. 17 (Tradition, vol. 25, 1, 1989)

Nahmanides' objections to counting prayer among the biblical commandments are technical and we feel that he himself was not fully convinced by them. He indeed suggested that Maimonides may have been correct in accepting the rabbinic statement at its face value but he suggested a new interpretation of that statement. According to Nahmanides, it should rather be explained as requiring a

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| <p>person who prays through his own volition, one who cannot help but call out from his anguish and suffering, to direct his call to God in the belief that He hears our prayers and helps us through prayer. We may suspect therefore that there is really some other or additional reason which underlies the rejection of the concept that God commands man to pray to Him. One may perhaps explain that the philosophical background to this is that prayer can not be demanded but can only come forth from the inner recognition of the true believer. It may even be said that prayer is the only true free-offering which man has to give God and the negation of its freeness by a commandment to pray would deny its true value.</p> | |
| <p>5. BT Berachoth 40b</p> <p>According to Rabbi Yose, "He who alters the form of benedictions fixed by the wise has failed to fulfill his obligations."</p> | <p>5. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף מ:</p> <p>רבי יוסי אומר: כל המשנה ממטבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות - לא יצא ידי חובתו.</p> |
| <p>6. BT Menahoth 43b</p> <p>Rabbi Meir declares it to be the duty of everyone to say one hundred benedictions daily.</p> | <p>6. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מנחות דף מג עמוד ב</p> <p>תניא, היה רבי מאיר אומר: חייב אדם לברך מאה ברכות בכל יום</p> |
| <p>7. Mishnah Avot, 2:18</p> <p>Rabbi Shimon said: Be meticulous in reciting the Shema and the [Amida] prayer. When you pray, do not do so as a fixed routine, but as a plea for mercy and grace before God, as it is said, "For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment."</p> | <p>7. משנה מסכת אבות, פרק שני (משנה יח)</p> <p>רבי שמעון אומר: א] הוי זהיר בקריאת שמע ובתפילה. ב] וכשאתה מתפלל אל תעש תפילתך קבע אלא רחמים ותחנונים לפני המקום ברוך הוא, שנאמר (יואל ב): "כי א-לחנן ורחום הוא, אך אפים ורב חסד, ונחם על הרעה."</p> |
| <p>8. Mishnah Berachot 4:3-4</p> <p>[3] Rabban Gamaliel says, One must say every day the <i>Eighteen Benedictions</i>. R. Joshua says, An abbreviated form of the <i>Eighteen Benedictions</i>. R. Akiba says, If one can read his Prayer(s) fluently he must say the <i>Eighteen Benedictions</i> but if not then the abbreviated form of the <i>Eighteen Benedictions</i>.</p> <p>[4] Rabbi Eliezer said: He who makes his prayer a fixed thing (<i>keva</i>), his prayer is not an act of grace.</p> | <p>8. משנה מסכת ברכות פרק ד</p> <p>משנה ג ג] רבן גמליאל אומר בכל יום מתפלל אדם שמונה עשרה רבי יהושע אומר מעין שמונה עשרה ר' עקיבא אומר אם שגורה תפלתו בפיו יתפלל שמונה עשרה ואם לאו מעין י"ח:</p> <p>משנה ד ד] רבי אליעזר אומר העושה תפלתו קבע אין תפלתו תחנונים</p> |
| <p>9. BT Brachot 29b</p> <p>Our Mishnah said: He who makes his prayers fixed etc. [The Gemara inquires:] What is the meaning of "fixed"?</p> <p>R. Yaakov bar Idi said in the name of R. Oshaya: Anyone whose prayer is like a burden on him.</p> <p>And the Rabbis say: Anyone who does not recite [his prayer] in a supplicatory manner.</p> <p>Rabbah and Rav Yosef both say: [This refers to] anyone who is unable to innovate something [in his prayer]. R. Zeira said: I am able to innovate something in [my prayer], but I am afraid to do so lest I become confused.</p> <p>Abaya bar Avin and R. Chanina bar Avin both say: Anyone who does not pray during the redness of the sun. As R. Chiya bar Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: It is a mitzvah to pray during the redness of the sun. And R. Zeira said: What is the verse, i.e. the</p> | <p>9. תלמוד בבלי, מסכת ברכות (דף כ"ט ע"ב)</p> <p>"רבי אליעזר אומר: העושה תפילתו קבע" כו'—מאי "קבע"? א] אמר רבי יעקב בר אידי, אמר רבי אושעיא: כל שתפילתו דומה עליו כמשוי. ב] ורבנן אמרי: כל מי שאינו אומר בלשון תחנונים. ג] רבה ורב יוסף דאמרי תרויהו: כל שאינו יכול לחדש בה דבר. אמר רבי זירא: אנא יכולנא לחדושי בה מילתא, ומסתפינא דלמא מטרידנא. ד] אביי בר אבין ורבי חנינא בר אבין, דאמרי תרויהו: כל שאין מתפלל עם דמדומי חמה. דאמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן: מצוה להתפלל עם דמדומי חמה. ואמר רבי זירא: מאי קראה? "ויראוך עם שמש, ולפני ירח דור</p> |

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| <p>source for R. Yochanan's ruling in Scripture? <i>They will fear You with [the rising of] the sun and before the moon [comes up], for generations upon generations.</i></p> | <p>דורים" (תהלים ע"ב). לייטי עלה במערבא אמאן דמצלי עם דמדומי חמה. מאי טעמא? דילמא מיטרפא ליה שעתא.</p> |
| <p>10. BT Megillah 25a</p> <p>One who says, We give thanks, we give thanks, he is silenced . . . Said Rabbi Pappa in Abaye: But perhaps [this is because] the person is not concentrating at first on what he is praying, but is concentrating the second time? He replied, Can one behave familiarly with heaven? If he did not pray with concentration from the outset, we hit him with a smith's hammer until he does.</p> | <p>10. תלמוד בבלי, מסכת מגילה, דף כ"ה ע"א</p> <p>אמר רבי זירא: האומר "שמע שמע" כאומר "מודים מודים" דמי... אמר ליה רב פפא לרבא: ודילמא מעיקרא לא כיון דעתיה והשתא כיון דעתיה אמר ליה: חברותא כלפי שמיא! אי לא מכיון דעתיה – מחינא ליה בארזפתא דנפחא עד דמכוין דעתיה!</p> |
| <p>11. TB Berakhot 26a</p> <p>The question was raised: if a man erred and did not say the afternoon prayer, should he say it twice in the evening? Should you argue from the fact that if he erred in the evening he prays twice in the morning? [I may reply that] this is because it is all one days, as it is written: "And there was evening and there was morning, one day" [Gen. 1:5]. But in this case, prayer being in the place of sacrifice, since the day has passed, the sacrifice lapses. Or should we rather say that since prayer is supplication for mercy, a man may go on praying as long as he likes? Come and hear: for Rabbi Hunah ben Judah said in the name of Rabbi Isaac reporting Rabbi Johanan: "If a man erred and did not say the afternoon prayer, he says it twice in the evening and we do not apply here the principle that if the day has passed, the offering lapses."</p> | <p>11. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כו עמוד א</p> <p>איבעיא להו: טעה ולא התפלל מנחה, מהו שיתפלל ערבית שתיים? אם תמצא לומר טעה ולא התפלל ערבית מתפלל שחרית שתיים - משום דחד יומא הוא, דכתיב +בראשית א'+ ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום אחד, אבל הכא - תפלה במקום קרבנהיא, וכיון דעבר יומו בטל קרבנו; או דילמא, כיון דצלותא רחמי היא - כל אימת דבעי מצלי ואזיל? - תא שמע: דאמר רב הונא בר יהודה אמר רבי יצחק אמר רבי יוחנן: טעה ולא התפלל מנחה - מתפלל ערבית שתיים, ואין בזה משום דעבריומו בטל קרבנו.</p> |
| <p>12. JT Shekalim 5, end</p> <p>Rabbi Hama ben Hanina and Rabbi Oshaya were strolling near the synagogue of Lud. Rabbi Hama boasted: "How much money have my ancestors invested in these buildings!" Rabbi Oshaya replied: "How many souls have they wasted here! Were there not students of Torah to support instead?" Rabbi Abin donated a gate to the Great Synagogue. When Rabbi Mana came to him, he boasted: "Do you see what I have done?" Said Rabbi Mana: "'When Israel forgets its Creator, they build temples.' (Hosea 8:14) Were there no students of Torah to support instead?"</p> | |
| <p>13. Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah</i>, Laws of Prayer, Ch. 4:6</p> <p>Prayer without <i>kavanah</i> is no prayer at all. He who has prayed without <i>kavanah</i> 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.</p> | |
| <p>14. Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah</i>, Laws of Prayer, Ch. 4:16</p> <p>One must free his heart from all other thoughts and regard himself as standing in the presence of the <i>Shekinah</i>. Therefore, before engaging in prayer, the worshipper ought to go aside a little in order to bring himself into a devotional frame of mind, and then he must pray quietly and with feeling, dnot like one who carries a weight and throws it away and goes farther."</p> | |
| <p>15. Joseph Tabory, <i>The Conflict of Halakhah and Prayer</i>, pp. 17 (Tradition, vol. 25, 1, 1989)</p> <p><i>Kavanah</i> derives from the Hebrew "direction" and its aspect which we called "intention" is</p> | |

partly one of direction. How does one feel the presence of God so that he can direct his prayers to Him? This problem arises when the average person is obligated to pray at specific times. Everybody feels the presence of God in times of trouble. A popular aphorism has it that there are no atheists in the trenches. An interesting Talmudic parallel to this idea is the statement that a thief, when in danger due to his illegal activity, calls out to God (BT *Berakhot*, 63b). On the other hand, the truly God-intoxicated person feels the presence of God constantly. This is perhaps the real meaning of David's statement "Evening and morning and noon I pray and sigh" (Psalms 55:18). He does not mean that he sighs but three times a day but rather that he sighs constantly. Halakhah accepts, at least *de jure*, that a man who is constantly involved in divine activity – like R. Simeon Bar Yohai – need not pray at all (BT *Shabbat* 11a) for, as Rabbi Soloveitchik has expressed it, studying the word of God also represents a communion with the divine. However, the ordinary person involved in his daily activities may only rarely, perhaps never, feel the presence of God. Halakhah felt that it must call this man to God by requiring him to pray at specific intervals. Indeed, a Tannaitic statement interprets the words of David as insisting on distinctly separate times of prayer in emulation of Daniel who prayed but three times a day (*Tosefta Berakhot* 3:6. Ed. S. Lieberman p. 12). The difficulty inherent in tearing oneself away from one's daily business in order to face God was recognized by Rav Huna who stressed the special importance of the afternoon prayer (BT *Berakhot* 6b). The *Tur* explained that the reason for placing such great stress on the importance of this prayer is because it comes when a man is absorbed in his affairs. We know only too well how rushed the afternoon prayer can be – when it is not completely forgotten – because so many things are on a person's mind during the day. In this case, the rabbis were faced with a problem of their own creation. How could they create the intention of facing God, a turning of the mind toward Heaven, in one who is totally absorbed in mundane activities and feels no such obligation on his own?

However, *halakhah* recognized the difficulties in legislating for the mind and decreed, with some reservations, that prayer was valid even without *kavanah*. The main efforts of the *halakhah* towards creating proper *kavanah* were directed to legislating acts of preparation before prayer. These were to have the effect of arousing the individual to an awareness that he is about to stand in awful devotion before the Master of the world. This was in accordance with a principle that was formulated much later by the author of *Sefer haHinukh* that actions have the power to create a state of mind.

It is with this in mind that we may understand the prescription of the *Tur* that one who prays must seek a proper place for prayer, that he must dress properly and see that his own body is properly clean and that he must prepare his mind for prayer. The final preparation of the body culminates in the requirement to stand in the posture thought appropriate for a servant who stands before his master (*Orah Hayyim* 95). Nothing should be held in one's hands that might interfere with the prayer and the *Shulhan Arukh* grudgingly permitted holding a prayer book (*Orah Hayyim* 96, 2).

16. R. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Spirit of Jewish Prayer (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity)*

At first sight, the relationship between *halacha* and *agada* in prayer appears to be simple. Tradition gives us the text, we create the *kavanah*. The text is given once and for all, the inner devotion comes into being every time anew. The text is the property of all ages, *kavanah* is the creation of a single moment. The text belongs to all Jews, *kavanah* is the private concern of every individual. And yet the problem is far from being simple. The text comes out of a book, it is given; *kavanah* must come out of the heart. But is the heart always ready – three times a day – to bring forth devotion? And if it is, is its devotion in tune with what the text proclaims?

[...]

How to maintain the reciprocity of tradition and freedom; how to retain both *keva* and *kavanah*, regularity and spontaneity, without upsetting the one or stifling the other?

[...]

Prayer becomes trivial when ceasing to be an act in the soul. The essence of prayer is *agada*. Yet it would be a tragic failure not to appreciate what the spirit of *halacha*, Jewish law, 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 *halacha* 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.

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.

17. R. A. J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pp. 130-131

In those months in Berlin I went through moments of profound bitterness. I felt very much alone with my own problems and anxieties. I walked alone in the evenings through the magnificent streets of Berlin. I admired the solidity of its architecture, the overwhelming drive and power of a dynamic civilization. There were concerts, theatres, and lectures by famous scholars about the latest theories and inventions, and I was pondering whether to go to the new Max Reinhardt play or to lecture about the theory of relativity.

Suddenly, I noticed the sun had gone down, evening had arrived.

From what hour is the Shema recited in the evening?

I had forgotten God – I had forgotten Sinai – I had forgotten that sunset is my business – that my task is “to repair the world under God’s dominion.”

So I began to utter the words “who with His word brings down the evening.”

And Goethe’s famous poem rang in my ear:

Über allem Gipfeln ist Ruh

O’er all the hilltops is quiet now.

No, that was pagan thinking. To the pagan eye the mystery of life is *Ruh’*, death, oblivion.

To us Jews, there is meaning beyond the mystery. We would say

O’er all the hilltops is the word of God

Über allen gipfeln is Gottes Wort

The meaning of life is to do His will. . .

Who with His word brings down the evening.

And his love is manifested in His teaching us Torah, precepts, laws

Über allen Gipfeln is God’s love for man –

You have loved your people the House of Israel with eternal love

Torah and mitzvot, laws and statutes you have taught us.

How much guidance, how many ultimate insights are found in the Siddur.

How grateful I am to God that there is 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.

Indeed, there is something which is far greater than my desire to pray. Namely, God’s desire that I pray. There is something which is far greater than my will to believe. Namely, God’s will that I believe.

How insignificant is my praying the midst of a cosmic process! Unless it is the will of God that I pray, how ludicrous is it to pray.

On that evening, in the streets of Berlin, I was not in a mood to pray. My heart was heavy, my soul was sad. It was difficult for the lofty words of prayer to break through the dark clouds of my inner life. But how would I dare not to *davn*? How would I dare to miss a *ma'ariv*? From what hour, *me'eimatai*, do we recite the *Shema*? Say rather, "Out of *eimah* [awe]...do we read the *Shema*."

18. R. J. B. Soloveitchik, "Ra'ayonot al ha-Tefillah", Ish ha-Halakhah, Galui v'Nistar, p. 244

The Halakhah never lets its attention be distracted from an aspect [of prayer] which constituted for it an almost insoluble problem and an amazing paradox. In the eyes of the sages of the tradition, having recourse to God in speech and entreaty seemed a bold and adventurous action. How can mortal man, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, approach the king of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He? Can we say that permission is given to a common person to talk to a high and exalted King and to require his needs from Him?

Evidently, the experience of fear and trembling, which is an integral part of the religious life, complicates the problem of prayer and turns it into a marvelous riddle. On the one hand, it is impossible for man to approach God. To the extent that man approaches God, his finite human existence is contradicted. Finitude is swallowed up in infinity and expires in its recesses . . . The personality and self-confidence of man are as nothing in comparison with the majesty of God and the splendor of His glory. The question burst out: how is it possible for prayer to exist?

19. R. J. B. Soloveitchik, "Ra'ayonot al ha-Tefillah", Ish ha-Halakhah, Galui v'Nistar, pp. 248-249

One who comes to begin entreating and petitioning [God] is full of fear: his initial immediate reaction expresses itself in paralyzing terror and alarmed trembling. He asks himself: how is it possible to conduct a conversation between man and his Creator? As his lips move, he expresses with quivering and trembling his weakness and insignificance. He begins saying: "O Lord, open Thou my lips and my mouth shall declare Thy praise." That is to say: "I do not know how to move my lips and find suitable words in order to express my thoughts. God, do that for me. I entreat Thee not only about the fulfillment of my petitions and the supply of my needs, but about the matter of the prayer itself. Foolish I am and I know nothing." This is the general introduction. A confession of dejection about his baseness, his distress, and his despair. See, he is entreating the Holy One, blessed be He: "Teach me how to pray." (1979b: 248-49).

20. R. J. B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah", Tradition 17:2 (Spring 1978), p. 62

Man is surely aware of many needs, but the needs he is aware of are not always his own. At the very root of this failure to recognize one's truly worthwhile needs lies man's ability to misunderstand and misidentify himself, i.e., to lose himself. Quite often man loses himself by identifying himself with the wrong image. Because of this misidentification, man adopts the wrong table of needs which he feels he must gratify. Man responds quickly to the pressure of certain needs, not knowing *whose* needs he is out to gratify. At this juncture, sin is born. What is the cause of sin, if not the diabolical habit of man to be mistaken about his own self?

21. R. J. B. Soloveitchik, Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah, Tradition 17:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 65-66

Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should, or should not, petition God about. Of the nineteen benedictions of our *Amidah*, thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions (*Retzeh* and *Sim Shalom*) are of a petitional nature. . . [Prayer] tells man the story of his hidden hopes and expectations. It teaches him how to behold the vision and how to strive in order to realize this vision, when to be satisfied with what one possesses, when to reach out for more. In a word, man finds his need-awareness, himself, in prayer. Of course, the very instant he finds himself, he becomes a redeemed being.