

PREFACE TO THE HEBREW/ENGLISH EDITION

“One generation will praise Your works to the next...”

It is with gratitude and pride that we introduce this first Hebrew/English Edition of the Koren Siddur. Since its publication in 1981, The Koren Siddur has been recognized for its textual accuracy and innovative graphic design. We have remained committed to these qualities, as we have had the privilege of enriching the Siddur with the eloquent English translation and insightful introduction and commentary of one of the most articulate and original Jewish thinkers of our time, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. It is our hope that through this project we have realized the aim of master typographer Eliyahu Koren, founder of Koren Publishers Jerusalem, “to present to worshipers a means to draw and connect them not only to the words of the prayers, but also to the contents and meaning that were before our sages when engraving the phrases of the prayers, and our rabbis throughout the ages when compiling versions of the prayers.”

Those new to The Koren Siddur will note several unique features:

- ▶ Two, distinct fonts, designed by Eliyahu Koren and recently digitized, are used throughout the Siddur. Koren Tanakh Font is used for Tanakh texts (except when embedded in prayers,) and Koren Siddur Font is used for prayers, in keeping with Mr. Koren’s belief that the presentation of Tanakh text should be distinctive.
- ▶ Reading aids, fully explained in the Guide to the Reader, facilitate correct reading.
- ▶ The graphic layout distinguishes poetry from prose, and provides space to allow pages to “breathe.” We have developed a parallel style for the English text that balances the weight of the Hebrew letters to further Mr. Koren’s intention of presenting the texts “in a style that does not spur habit and hurry, but rather encourages the worshiper to engross his mind and heart in prayer.”

This Hebrew/English Edition also includes new features. We have added Rabbi Sacks’ introduction and commentary to illuminate and clarify practice and tradition. We have introduced concise instructions and practical *halakha* guides. Finally, we have incorporated prayers for

and Kabbala – were so meticulous about perfecting. In parts of prayers (such as the Shema and the Blessing of the Kohanim), they viewed this meticulous pronunciation as obligatory.

In order to relieve the worshiper of these details – for the sake of his praying – we have presented him (excluding Biblical quotations) with a different notation between the two *sh’vas* (the mobile *sh’va* is more predominant, which is a sign for the worshiper to express the vowel as a brief *segol*, while the quiescent *sh’va* is smaller, as it is not pronounced), and a special form of the *kamatz* (the “small *kamatz*” has a longer foot).

“A window thou shalt make to the ark,” says God to Noah, and our sages took this also to mean that the correct pronunciation of the words is an embellishment to the prayers. It is fitting that our conversations with God be clear, pure and unblemished, open and lit as this window.

The Nusah Ashkenaz edition of this Siddur is based upon that of the “first Ashkenazic scholars,” incorporating the revisions that were accepted in the land of Israel by the pupils of the Vilna Ga’on, and are customary in synagogues in Israel and the Diaspora (with different customs indicated).

I am very grateful to the excellent proofreaders Shmuel Vexler and Abraham Frankel, for their diligent work, and to Esther Be’er, who skillfully prepared the difficult typesetting of this Siddur.

All this would not have been possible without the help and guidance of my friend Meir Medan, who helped us reach this goal. Using his vast knowledge and careful comparison between different versions, we strived together to make this Siddur as perfect as humanly possible.

And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish the work of our hands upon us; O prosper it, the work of our hands.

Eliyahu Koren

FOREWORD

Our sages encourage us to have very lofty expectations of ourselves with regard to our prayers. Maimonides, for example, considers the duty to pray to have a firm basis in the written Torah. Rabbi Judah HaLevi considers our moment of prayer to be the “heart of our daily routine.” Rabbi Kook speaks of the “perennial prayer of the soul.”

Most of us have occasionally experienced such moments of spirituality – perhaps during a particularly inspirational holiday service, or perhaps in a moment of exultant joy or poignant sorrow. But those rare moments depend on very special circumstances. The challenge is to achieve a sense of spirituality during routine prayer times, which are fixed and regular – three times a day, every day of the year – and even in mundane moments and dreary contexts.

We need external stimuli which can refresh our inner selves to help us capture, if not sublimity, then at least a sense of the sacred. A proper siddur, which is sensitive to the needs of he or she who prays, can be such a stimulus.

The Siddur which you have before you, produced by master publishers of Hebrew books, Koren of Jerusalem, attempts to relate to the spiritual needs of those who turn to prayer and need an aesthetic context which will raise them from their routine to a higher sphere. This Siddur accomplishes this mission in several ways. It affords us the beautiful, contemporary, impactful translation of a man who, perhaps more than anyone else of our generation, is in tune with the spiritual needs of the English-speaking Jew. In this prayer book, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers us words of introduction and explanation, commentary, and an exquisite grasp of the poetry of prayer. The conceptual richness of his thoughts, coupled with the artistic beauty of his choice of words, will stimulate a sense of the sacred in everyone who uses this Siddur.

The clear print, the spacing, and the punctilious attention to the grammar and syntax of the Hebrew are all part and parcel of what we have come to expect from Koren Publishers. Every page is a pleasure to the eye. The layout conveys dignity and depth, and the subtleties of text and design will move us, sometimes unconsciously, to feelings and intuitions that are novel, pleasing and uplifting.

◀ In our prayers

visitors to Israel, for Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzma'ut to reflect the essential and integral connection between the Jewish people in Israel and around the world, and the centrality of Jerusalem to us all.

It is always a privilege to collaborate on a project with those who share our commitment and enthusiasm for bringing out the beauty of *Tefilla*. We are grateful to Judith and David Lobel for their support and proud to have their name grace this edition. On behalf of the scholars, editors and designers of this volume, we thank you; on behalf of the users of this Siddur, we are forever in your debt.

We wish to thank Rabbi Sacks שליט"א for his exceptional introduction, translation and commentary, and his dedicated involvement throughout the preparation of this Siddur; Rabbi Eli Clark for his extraordinarily helpful section on *halakha*; and Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb שליט"א, David Olivestone and their colleagues at the Orthodox Union for their support and appreciation.

A number of rabbis devoted considerable time to review, correct and offer invaluable suggestions to early drafts of the Siddur. We especially wish to thank Rabbi Michael Broyde for his critical help, as well as Dr. David Berger, Rabbi Elazar Muskin, Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt, Dr. Moshe Sokolow, and Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner. To all who made corrections and suggestions, thank you.

Raphaël Freeman designed and typeset the Siddur, and led an outstanding team at Koren, including Rabbi David Fuchs and Esther Be'er. We also thank the following individuals for their invaluable assistance: Chanan Ariel and Yisrael Elitzur for their expertise in Hebrew grammar; Rachel Meghnagi for her English language editorial assistance, and Simon Prais for his contribution to the design process.

We can only hope that we have extended the vision of Eliyahu Koren to a new generation and a larger audience, furthering *Avodat HaShem* for Jews everywhere.

Matthew Miller, Publisher
Jerusalem 5769 (2009)

UNDERSTANDING JEWISH PRAYER

1. *Introduction*

Prayer is the language of the soul in conversation with God. It is the most intimate gesture of the religious life, and the most transformative. The very fact that we can pray testifies to the deepest elements of Jewish faith: that the universe did not come into existence accidentally, nor are our lives destined to be bereft of meaning. The universe exists, and we exist, because someone – the One God, Author of all – brought us into existence with love. It is this belief more than any other that redeems life from solitude and fate from tragedy.

In prayer we speak to a presence vaster than the unfathomable universe, yet closer to us than we are to ourselves: the God beyond, who is also the Voice within. Though language must fail when we try to describe a Being beyond all parameters of speech, language is all we have, and it is enough. For God who made the world with creative words, and who revealed His will through holy words, listens to our prayerful words. Language is the bridge joining us to Infinity.

Judah HaLevi, the great eleventh-century poet, said that prayer is to the soul what food is to the body. Without prayer, something within us atrophies and dies. It is possible to have a life without prayer, just as it is possible to have a life without music, or love, or laughter, but it is a diminished thing, missing whole dimensions of experience. We need space within the soul to express our joy in being, our wonder at the universe, our hopes, our fears, our failures, our aspirations – bringing our deepest thoughts as offerings to the One who listens, and listening, in turn, to the One who calls. Those who pray breathe a more expansive air: “In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise” (W. H. Auden).

The siddur is the choral symphony the covenantal people has sung to God across forty centuries, from the days of the patriarchs until the present day. In it we hear the voices of Israel’s prophets, priests and kings, its sages and scholars, poets and philosophers, rationalists and mystics, singing in calibrated harmony. Its libretto weaves together texts from almost every part of the vast library of Jewish spirituality: Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, the classic compendia of the Oral Law – Mishna, Midrash

In our prayers, we are connected to the Almighty through the land of Israel, the city of Jerusalem and the site of the holy Temple. It is, therefore, especially valuable that this Siddur connects those who use it to the land of Israel in very contemporary ways. It contains, for example, the prayer for the welfare of Israel, as well as the prayer for the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces. It reflects our celebration of Israel’s independence and our sorrow for those who have fallen in its defense.

It is with great pride that the Orthodox Union joins in presenting this Siddur to the Jewish communities of North America. Numerous siddurim are available, but this one, through a variety of modalities – intellectual, aesthetic, poetic and visual – is designed and is destined to motivate prayers which are richer, more meaningful, and – yes – more effective.

For prayer to “fly heavenward,” it must come from a heart full of contrition and sincerity. This Siddur will help bring forth that contrition and sincerity from the souls of those who use it.

May He who hears all of our prayers listen attentively to the prayers which this Siddur will evoke.

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
Executive Vice President, Orthodox Union
New York 5769 (2009)

Calf. There are no general rules: these prayers have no fixed time, place or liturgy. They are improvised as circumstance demands.

The other form – generally known as *avoda*, “service” – is sacrifice. Sacrifice could not be less like prayer. As set out from Exodus to Deuteronomy, the sacrificial service is minutely specified. It has its prescribed order: which offerings should be made, when, and by whom. It has a designated place: the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and later, the Temple in Jerusalem. There is no room for spontaneity. When two of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, make a spontaneous offering of incense, they die (Lev. 10:1–2). The Mosaic books contain two set texts associated with the Temple: the Priestly Blessing (Num. 6:24–26) and the declaration made when bringing the first fruits (Deut. 26:5–10). Certain sacrifices, such as sin-offerings, involved verbal confession. Psalms were sung in the Temple, and the Mishna details the prayers said there. But the sacrificial act itself was wordless. It took place in silence.

So we have two quite different traditions, prayer and sacrifice: one spontaneous, the other rigorously legislated; one that could be undertaken anywhere, at any time, by anyone; the other which could only happen in a set place and time in accordance with detailed and inflexible procedures. How did these two forms of worship become one?

The answer lies in the national crisis and renewal that occurred after the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. Psalm 137 has preserved a vivid record of the mood of near-despair among the exiles: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept as we remembered Zion... How can we sing the LORD’s songs in a strange land?” In exile in Babylon, Jews began to gather to expound the Torah, articulate a collective hope of return, and recall the Temple and its service. These assemblies (*kinishtu* in Babylonian, *knesset* in Hebrew) were not substitutes for the Temple; rather, they were reminders of it. The book of Daniel, set in Babylon, speaks of threefold daily prayer facing Jerusalem (Dan. 6:11). The loss of the Temple and the experience of exile led to the emergence of regular gatherings for study and prayer.

The next chapter in this story was written by Ezra (fifth century BCE) who, together with the statesman Nehemiah, reorganized Jewish life in Israel after the return from Babylon. Ezra (“the scribe”) was a new type in

and Talmud – together with philosophical passages like Maimonides’ “Thirteen Principles of Faith” and extracts from the *Zohar*, the key text of Jewish mysticism.

There is space in Judaism for private meditation – the personal plea. But when we pray publicly, we do so as members of a people who have served, spoken to, and wrestled with God for longer and in more varied circumstances than any other in history. We use the words of the greatest of those who came before us to make our prayers articulate and to join them to the prayers of others throughout the world and throughout the centuries.

Almost every age and major Jewish community has added something of its own: new words, prayers, customs and melodies. There are many different liturgies: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Oriental, Yemenite, Italian, those of Rabbi Isaac Luria and the Vilna Gaon and others, each with its own subdivisions. Each tradition has a character of its own, to which Jewish law applies the principle *nahara nahara ufashteh*: “Every river has its own course.” Each of the historic traditions has its own integrity, its own channel through which words stream from earth to heaven.

This introduction tells of how prayer came to take its present form, the distinct spiritual strands of which it is woven, the structures it has, and the path it takes in the journey of the spirit.

2. Two Sources of Prayer

The best-known phrase about Jewish religious worship is: “If you serve the LORD your God with all your heart (Deut. 10:13) – what is [the sacrificial] service of the heart (*avoda shebalev*)? This is prayer” (*Sifrei to Deuteronomy*, 41). Behind these simple words lies a remarkable story.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we find two quite different forms of religious worship. One is prayer. Outside the book of Psalms there are some 140 references to people praying; in ninety-seven cases we are told the words they said. Abraham prays for the cities of the plain. Jacob prays for deliverance before confronting Esau. Hannah prays for a child. These prayers are direct, simple and spontaneous. They have no fixed formula, no set text. Some are very brief, like Moses’ five-word prayer for his sister Miriam: “Please, God, heal her now.” Others are long, like Moses’ forty-day prayer for forgiveness of the people after the sin of the Golden

The transition from sacrifice to prayer was not a sudden development. A thousand years earlier, in his speech at the dedication of the Temple, King Solomon had emphasized prayer rather than sacrifice (1 Kings 8:12–53). Through Isaiah, God had said “My House shall be called a *house of prayer* for all peoples” (Is. 56:7). The prophet Hosea had said: “Take words with you and return to the LORD... Instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips” (Hos. 14:3). Sacrifice was the external accompaniment of an inner act of heart and mind: thanksgiving, atonement, and so on. Therefore, though the outer act was no longer possible, the inner act remained. That is how sacrifice turned into prayer.

What had once been two quite different forms of worship now became one. Prayer took on the highly structured character of the sacrificial service, with fixed texts and times. The silence that had accompanied the sacrifice was transmuted into speech. Two traditions – prophetic prayer on the one hand, priestly sacrificial service on the other – merged and became one. That is the remarkable story behind the words, “What is the [sacrificial] service of the heart? This is prayer.”

There is a series of arguments, spanning the centuries, about the nature of prayer. According to Maimonides, daily prayer is a biblical commandment; according to Nahmanides it is merely rabbinic. Two third-century teachers, Rabbi Yose son of Rabbi Hanina, and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, disagreed as to the origin of the prayers, the former holding that they were instituted by the patriarchs – Abraham initiating the morning prayer, Isaac the afternoon, and Jacob the evening service – while the latter held that they corresponded to the sacrifices. Centuries earlier, Rabban Gamliel and the sages differed as to which was primary, the silent Amida or the Leader’s Repetition. Each of these debates ultimately hinges on the question as to which of the two sources of prayer – the improvised prayers of the figures of the Bible or the sacrificial service of the Tabernacle and Temple – is the more fundamental.

In truth, there is no answer: prayer as we have known it for two millennia draws on both traditions. More remarkably, we honor both, because *each Amida is said twice*, once silently by individuals, a second time aloud and publicly by the Leader. The silent Amida recalls the prayers of individuals in the Bible, while the Leader’s Repetition recalls the sacrifice: hence there is no Repetition of the evening Amida, since there was no

history: the educator as hero. The book of Nehemiah (8:1–9) contains a detailed description of the national assembly Ezra convened in Jerusalem, where he read the Torah aloud, with the help of the Levites who explained it to the people.

Ezra and Nehemiah were disturbed by the high degree of assimilation among the Jews who had remained in Israel. They knew that without a strong religious identity, the people would eventually disappear through intermingling with other nations and cultures. To guard against this, they set in motion far-reaching initiatives, including a national reaffirmation of the nation’s covenant with God (Nehemiah, chapter 10). One of the most important developments was the first formulation of prayers, attributed by the sages to Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly. Maimonides suggests that one of their motives for so doing was to reestablish Hebrew as the national language: at that time, “Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, or the language of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah” (Neh. 13:24; Maimonides’ “Laws of Prayer” 1:4).

One of the results of this religious renewal was the birth, or growth, of the synagogue. During the Second Temple period, priests were divided into twenty-four groups, *mishmarot*, each of which served in the Temple for a week in a rota. They were accompanied by groups of local laypeople, *ma’amadot*, some of whom accompanied them to the Temple, others of whom stayed in their towns but said prayers to coincide with the sacrifices. Whether the synagogue developed from these *ma’amadot*, or whether its origins were earlier, by the time the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, it was a well-established institution.

The synagogue was “one of the greatest revolutions in the history of religion and society” (M. Stern). It was the first place of worship made holy, not because of any historic association, nor because sacrifices were offered, but simply because people gathered there to study and pray. It embodied one of the great truths of monotheism: that the God of everywhere could be worshiped anywhere. After the loss of the Second Temple it became the home-in-exile of a scattered people. Every synagogue was a fragment of Jerusalem. And though the destruction of the Temple meant that sacrifices could no longer be offered, in their place came an offering of words, namely prayer.

the specific bond of love between God and the Jewish people. Look and you will find many more examples in the siddur. (The one exception is *Aleinu*, whose first paragraph is about Jewish particularity and whose second is a universal hope. Regarding this, see section B. MIRROR-IMAGE SYMMETRY.)

This movement from universal to particular is distinctively Jewish. Western culture, under the influence of Plato, has tended to move in the opposite direction, from the concrete instance to the general rule, valuing universals above particularities. Judaism is the great counter-Platonic narrative in Western civilization.

Moving from the universal to the particular, the prayer book mirrors the structure of the Torah itself. Genesis begins, in its first eleven chapters, with a description of the universal condition of humankind. Only in its twelfth chapter is there a call to an individual, Abraham, to leave his land, family and father's house and lead a life of righteousness through which "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

There are universals of human behavior: we call them the Noahide Laws. But we worship God in and through the particularity of our history, language and heritage. The highest love is not abstract but concrete. Those who truly love, cherish what makes the beloved different, unique, irreplaceable: that is the theme of the greatest of all books of religious love, *the Song of Songs*. That, we believe, is how God loves us.

B. MIRROR-IMAGE SYMMETRY

Many Torah passages are constructed in the form of a mirror-image symmetry, technically known as *chiasmus*: a sequence with the form ABCBA, where the second half reverses the order of the first. A precise example is the six-word commandment that forms the central element of the Noahide covenant (Gen. 9:6):

[A] Who sheds [B] the blood [C] of man [C] by man [B] shall his blood [A] be shed.

This is more than a stylistic device. It is the expression of one of the Torah's most profound beliefs; namely, the reciprocal nature of justice. Those who do good are blessed with good. Those who do evil, suffer evil. What happens to us is a mirror image of what we do. Thus, form

sacrifice in the evening. In prayer, two great streams of Jewish spirituality met and became one.

3. Structures of Prayer

The Hebrew word for a prayer book, *siddur*, means "order." At its height, prayer is an intensely emotional experience. The wonder of praise, the joy of thanksgiving, the passion of love, the trembling of awe, the broken-heartedness of confession, the yearning of hope – all these are part of the tonality of prayer. Yet Judaism is also, and supremely, a religion of the mind – for untutored emotion, like a river that bursts its banks, can be anarchic and destructive. The opening chapter of Genesis, with its account of creation, evokes a sense of order. Each day has its task; each life-form has its place; and the result (until the birth of sin) was harmony. Jewish prayer, therefore, has an order. Like a choral symphony, it has movements, each with its moods, its unfolding themes, its developmental logic. In this section, I analyze some of these structures.

The siddur as it exists today is the result of some forty centuries of Jewish history. Yet the result is not mere bricolage, a patchwork of random additions. It is as if the composition of the prayer book has been shaped by an "invisible hand," a divine inspiration that transcends the intentions of any particular author. Specifically, form mirrors substance. The shape of the prayers reveals the basic shape of the Jewish spirit as it has been molded by its encounter with God. These are some of the structural features of the prayers:

A. FROM UNIVERSAL TO PARTICULAR

In general, sequences of Jewish prayer move from the universal to the particular. Grace after Meals, for example, begins with a blessing thanking God "who in His goodness feeds *the whole world*." The second blessing moves to particularities: Israel, liberation from slavery, "the covenant which You sealed in our flesh," Torah and the commandments. We thank God "for the land [of Israel] and for the food." The third is more narrowly focused still. It is about the holy city, Jerusalem.

The same pattern exists in the two blessings before the Shema in the morning and evening service. The first is about the universe (God gives light to the earth, creates day and night), and the second is about Torah,

The Amida is constructed on this template. Of its nineteen blessings, the first three express praise. The middle thirteen on weekdays are requests (we do not make requests in the Amida on Shabbat or Yom Tov, which are times dedicated to thanking God for what we have, as opposed to asking Him for what we lack). The final three are acknowledgments. The same pattern can be seen in the blessings over the Torah at the beginning of the morning service (see section G. FRACTALS).

D. PREPARATION, PRAYER, MEDITATION

Prayer requires intense concentration, and this takes time. It is impossible to move directly from the stresses and preoccupations of everyday life into the presence of eternity. Nor should prayer end abruptly. It must be internalized if it is to leave its trace within us as we move back into our worldly pursuits. Maimonides writes that because prayer needs mental focus,

One should therefore sit awhile *before* beginning his prayers, so as to concentrate his mind. He should then pray in gentle tones, beseechingly, and not regard the service as a burden that he is carrying and which he will cast off before proceeding on his way. He should thus sit awhile *after* concluding the prayers, and only then leave. The ancient saints used to pause and meditate one hour before prayer and one hour after prayer, and spend an hour in prayer itself. (Laws of Prayer 4:16)

In the morning service, the Verses of Praise (*Pesukei deZimra*) are the preparation. In them, our thoughts gradually turn from the visible world to its invisible Creator. The Shema, Amida and their surrounding blessings are prayer as such. The remainder of the service is our meditation as we leave the orbit of heaven and reenter the gravitational field of earth.

E. DESCRIPTION, EXPERIENCE, RECOLLECTION

It is one thing to describe an experience, another to live it. One of the striking features of the weekday morning service is its threefold repetition of the *Kedusha* (“Holy, holy, holy”), once before the Shema (known as *Kedushat Yotzer*); a second time during the Leader’s Repetition of the Amida; and a third time during the prayer “A redeemer will come to Zion” (known as *Kedusha deSidra*). The first and third are different from

◀ the second

mirrors substance: mirror-image symmetry is the literary equivalent of a just world.

Some prayers have a mirror-image structure. Most of the paragraphs of the Amida, for example, finish the same way as they begin (“at the end of a blessing one should say something similar to its beginning,” *Pesachim* 104a). So, for example, the sixteenth blessing begins, “Listen to our voice” and ends “who listens to prayer.” The eighteenth begins, “We give thanks to You” and ends “to whom thanks are due.” The Amida as a whole begins with a request to God to help us open our mouths in prayer. It ends with a request to God to help us close our mouths from deceitful speech.

According to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the first and last three blessings of the Amida stand in a mirror-image relationship. The last uses the same key words as the first: kindness (*hesed*) and love (*ahava*). The penultimate has the same subject as the second: the gift of life and the hidden miracles that surround us constantly. The seventeenth and third are both about holiness. Thus the end of the Amida is a mirror image of its beginning.

This explains why *Aleinu* – the prayer with which most services end – is constructed in a sequence opposite to all other prayers. Others move from the universal to the particular, but *Aleinu* reverses the order, beginning with a hymn to particularity (“Who has not made us like the nations of the lands”) and ending with one of the great prayers for universality, when “all humanity will call on Your name.” *Aleinu* gives each service a chiasmic structure. Previous prayers have been A–B (universal–particular); *Aleinu* is B–A (particular–universal).

As we will see, many of the other structuring principles are three-part series of the form A–B–A.

C. PRAISE, REQUEST, THANKS

The sages ruled that the Amida – prayer par excellence – should follow a basic pattern of praise (*shevah*), request (*bakasha*), and acknowledgment or thanks (*hodaya*). This is how Maimonides puts it: “The obligation of prayer is that every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer, first uttering *praises* of God, then with humble *supplication and petition* asking for all that he needs, and finally offering praise and *thanksgiving* to the Eternal for the benefits already bestowed on him in rich measure” (Laws of Prayer 1:2).

◀ The Amida

The first of the “request” prayers in the daily Amida is a fractal. It replicates in miniature the structure of the Amida as a whole (Praise–Request–Thanks). It begins with praise: “You grace humanity with knowledge and teach mortals understanding,” moves to request: “Grace us with the knowledge, understanding and discernment,” and ends with thanksgiving: “Blessed are You, O LORD, who graciously grants knowledge.” You will find many other fractals in the siddur.

The existence of fractals in the siddur shows us how profoundly the structures of Jewish spirituality feed back repeatedly into the architectonics of prayer.

H. MIDRASHIC EXPANSION

Midrash is the rabbinic investigation into the meaning of holy texts: the root *d-r-sh* means “to explore, enquire, explain, expound.” It seeks out the inflections and innuendos of words, making explicit their implicit dimensions of meaning.

One example occurs in the *Nishmat* prayer on Shabbat morning (page 445). A key phrase in prayer, spoken by Moses and incorporated into the first paragraph of the Amida, is “God, great, mighty and awesome” (Deut. 10:17). *Nishmat* meditates on these four words, one by one:

God – in Your absolute power,
Great – in the glory of Your name,
Mighty – for ever,
Awesome – in Your awe-inspiring deeds.

Another is the passage on Shabbat morning following the phrase “who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates all” (pages 455–457). A brief prayer takes the last word, “all,” and builds around it a fivefold set of variations: “*All* will thank You. *All* will praise You. *All* will declare: Nothing is holy as is the LORD. *All* will exalt You, Selah, You who form *all*.”

Always look for apparent repetition in prayer – like the tenfold “Blessed” in *Barukh SheAmar* (“Blessed is He who spoke”), the eightfold “True” after the Shema, or the fivefold “All” immediately after *Barekhu* (“Bless the LORD”) on Shabbat morning. Reiteration is never mere repetition. The prayer is inviting us to meditate on the multiple layers of

◀ meaning

the second in that, (1) they do not require a *minyan*, and (2) they do not need to be said standing.

The *Kedusha* – one of the supreme moments of holiness in Jewish prayer – is constructed around the mystical visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, of God enthroned in majesty, surrounded by angels singing His praises. In the first and third *Kedushot*, we *describe* the angelic order; in the second, we *enact* it, using the same words, but this time in direct, not reported, speech (Geonim, Maimonides). The intensity of *Kedusha* is heightened by this three-movement form: first the anticipation and preparation, then the experience itself, and finally the recollection.

F. PRIVATE, PUBLIC, PRIVATE

The Amida itself – especially on weekday mornings and afternoons – is constructed on a triadic pattern. First it is said silently by the members of the congregation as individuals. Next it is repeated publicly out loud by the Leader. This is then usually followed by private supplications (*Tahanun*), also said quietly. As I have suggested above, this is a way of reenacting the two modes of spirituality from which prayer derives. The silent Amida recalls the intensely personal prayers of the patriarchs and prophets. The public Repetition represents the daily sacrifices offered by the priests in the Temple on behalf of all Israel (there is no Repetition of the evening Amida because there were no sacrifices at night). Thus the prayers weave priestly and prophetic, individual and collective voices, into a single three-movement sonata of great depth and resonance.

G. FRACTALS

We owe to the scientist Benoit Mandelbrot the concept of fractals: the discovery that phenomena in nature often display the same pattern at different levels of magnitude. A single rock looks like a mountain. Crystals, snowflakes and ferns are made up of elements that have the same shape as the whole. Fractal geometry is the scientific equivalent of the mystical ability to sense the great in the small: “To see a world in a grain of sand / And a Heaven in a wild flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an hour” (William Blake).

◀ The first

but adds that God exists *beyond* time and space. Hence seven – the one beyond six – became the symbol of the holy.

Six, too, is not a simple number in Judaism. This becomes evident when we read the story of creation in Genesis 1 carefully. The first six days fall into two groups. On the first three, God created and separated *domains* (1: light and darkness, 2: upper and lower waters, 3: sea and dry land). On the second three God *populated* these domains, each with its appropriate objects or life-forms (4: sun, moon and stars, 5: birds and fish, 6: land animals and man). The seventh day, Shabbat, is *holy* because it stands *outside* nature and its causal-scientific laws.

Mirroring this pattern, the morning service is structured around the number seven: the three paragraphs of the Shema, surrounded by three blessings, leading to the seventh, the Amida, which is the domain of the holy, where we stand directly in the presence of God. On holy days – Shabbat and Yom Tov – the Amida has a sevenfold structure: the three opening and closing paragraphs, plus a middle paragraph dedicated to “the holiness of the day.”

It follows that sixfold structures in the siddur signal the universe and creation. Thus, on weekday mornings we say six psalms (145–150) in the Verses of Praise. *Kabbalat Shabbat* also contains six psalms, corresponding to the days of the week, before *Lekha Dodi*, which represents Shabbat itself. The blessing after the Shema repeats the keyword *Emet* (“true”) six times to show how God’s love is translated into redemptive activity in a this-worldly time and space.

Many prayers such as *El Adon* (page 461) and *Aleinu* are constructed in a pattern of fours: four-line verses, each of four words. Often these reflect Jewish mysticism with its four “worlds”: *Asiyya* (Action), *Yetzira* (Formation), *Beri’a* (Creation) and *Atzilut* (Emanation). *Merkava* mysticism, based on Ezekiel’s vision of the divine chariot, is an important strand of early rabbinic prayer.

The number ten represents the “ten utterances with which the world was created” (the ten places in Genesis 1 where an act of creation is preceded by the words “God said”). That is why *Barukh SheAmar*, the blessing before the creation section of the prayers, begins with a tenfold litany of phrases each beginning with the word “Blessed.”

meaning that may exist in a single word or phrase, as if words were diamonds and we were turning them this way and that to catch their multiple refractions of light.

I. NUMERICAL STRUCTURES

As we have seen, many of the prayers have an obvious three-part structure, but in some cases this is repeated in great detail on a smaller scale, as in fractals.

The most striking example is the weekday Amida, which is composed of three parts: praise–request–acknowledgment. The first and last of these are each constructed in threes: three blessings of praise at the beginning, and three of acknowledgment at the end. Less obvious is the fact that the middle thirteen blessings – “requests” – *also* share this structure. There are six individual requests, followed by six collective ones, each divided into two groups of three. The individual requests begin with three spiritual needs (understanding, repentance, forgiveness) followed by three material ones (deliverance from oppression, healing, prosperity). The collective requests begin with three political-historical elements (ingathering of exiles, restoration of judges, and an end to internal strife – the “slanderers”), followed by the three spiritual bases of nationhood (the righteous, Jerusalem, and the restoration of the Davidic monarchy). The thirteenth, “Listen to our voice,” stands outside this structure because it is not directed to any specific request but is, instead, a prayer that our prayers be heeded.

The number seven is also significant and always indicates holiness, as in the seventh day, Shabbat; the seventh month, Tishrei with its Days of Awe; the seventh year, the “year of release”; and the fiftieth year, the Jubilee, which follows seven cycles of seven years. Seven in Judaism is not a simple prime number. It is the *one-after-six*. Six represents the material, physical, secular. Ancient Mesopotamia, the birthplace of Abraham, originally used a numerical system based on the number six. Western civilization still bears traces of this in the twenty-four hour day (2×6 hours of light, plus 2×6 of darkness); the sixty (10×6) minutes in an hour, and seconds in a minute; and the 360 degrees in a circle ($6 \times 6 \times 10$). All of these originated in astronomy, at which the ancient Mesopotamians excelled. Judaism acknowledges the six-part structure of time and space,

4. *Creation, Revelation, Redemption*

One structural principle of the prayers deserves special attention, since it touches on the fundamentals of Jewish faith. In the twelfth century, Moses Maimonides enumerated the Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith. They appear in the siddur in two forms: the poem known as Yigdal (page 25) and a prose version after the end of the morning service (page 203).

Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemah Duran (1361–1444) pointed out that Maimonides' principles could be analyzed and categorized into three themes: (1) the existence of God, the Creator (principles 1–5: God's existence, unity, incorporeality and eternity, and that He alone is to be worshiped); (2) Divine revelation (principles 6–9: prophecy, Moses' uniqueness, the God-given character of the Torah and its immutability), and (3) God's justice (principles 10–13: God knows all, repays us according to our deeds, and will bring the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead). The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig summarized these in three words: creation, revelation, redemption. Creation is the relationship between God and the universe. Revelation is the relationship between God and humanity. Redemption occurs when we apply revelation to creation.

The movement from creation to revelation to redemption is one of the great structural motifs of prayer. One example is the three blessings in the morning service, surrounding the Shema and leading up to the Amida (pages 89–107). The first is about the *creation* of the universe in space and time; the second is about the *revelation* of the Torah; and the third is about the miracles of history, ending with the words, “who *redeemed* Israel.”

The three paragraphs of the Shema display the same pattern. The first is about creation (God's unity and sovereignty), the second about revelation (acceptance of the commandments), and the third about redemption (“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt”).

The weekday morning service as a whole is constructed on this principle. First come the Verses of Praise, taken from the book of Psalms, with their majestic vision of creation. Then follows the central section – the Shema and its blessings, leading to the Amida – in which we sit, then stand, in the immediate presence of God (revelation). Finally we come to the concluding prayers with their central line, “A *redeemer* will come to Zion.” The second paragraph of *Aleinu* is likewise a vision of redemption.

The pattern is repeated yet again in the Shabbat evening, morning

◀ and afternoon

Fifteen represents the fifteen steps between the courtyards of the Temple, the fifteen psalms beginning “A song of ascents,” and the numerical value of the first two letters of God's holiest name. Hence, there are fifteen expressions of praise in the paragraph *Yishtabeh* (page 451), fifteen adjectives following “the LORD Your God is true” at the end of the Shema in the morning service, fifteen psalms in the Verses of Praise on Shabbat and Yom Tov mornings, and so on. There are also more intricate numerical patterns.

These are not mere aesthetic conventions like, for example, the fourteen-line sonnet form or the four-movement structure of a symphony. As always in Judaism there is a matching of form to content, structure to substance. The sages understood – as did the ancient Greeks, amply confirmed by modern science – that *reality has a numerical structure*. Mirroring this structure in prayer, we evoke the sense of a world of order in which we are called upon to respect differences and honor boundaries, accepting graciously the integrity of natural and moral law.

J. FROM LOVE TO AWE

The supreme religious emotions are love and awe – in that order. We are commanded to “Love the LORD your God.” We are also commanded to experience the feelings associated with the Hebrew word *yira*, which means “awe, fear, reverence.” This is how Maimonides puts it: “When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom, which is incomparable and infinite, he will immediately love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great name... And when he ponders these matters, he will recoil frightened, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of He who is perfect in knowledge” (*Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2).

The supreme expression of love in Judaism is the Shema with its injunction: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” The supreme expression of awe is the Amida prayer, when we stand consciously in the presence of God. The basic movement of the morning and evening prayers is first, to climb to the peak of love, the Shema, and from there to the summit of awe, the Amida.

◀ 4. *Creation*

In the main section of prayer, the paragraph preceding the Shema is a form of blessing over the Torah (see *Berakhot* 11b), and the Shema itself represents Torah study (*Menahot* 99b). The last section of the weekday morning prayers (pages 175–177) was originally associated with the custom of studying ten verses from the prophetic books. Kaddish, which plays such a large part in the prayers, had its origin in the house of study as the conclusion of a *derasha*, a public exposition of biblical texts. The entire weekday morning service is thus an extended fugue between study and prayer.

This is dramatized in two key phrases: the first is *Shema Yisrael*, “Listen, Israel,” God’s word through Moses and the Torah, and the second is *Shema Koleinu*, “Listen to our voice,” the paragraph within the Amida that summarizes all our requests (see above). These two phrases frame the great dialogue of study and prayer. Faith lives in these two acts of listening: ours to the call of God, God’s to the cry of humankind.

6. Prayer and Mysticism

Jewish mysticism has played a major role in the prayer book. The most obvious examples are the passage from the *Zohar*, “Blessed is the name” (page 503), the Song of Glory (pages 571–573) written by one of the medieval north-European pietists, and the two songs written by the sixteenth-century Safed mystics associated with Rabbi Isaac Luria, “Beloved of the soul” (page 309) and “Come, my Beloved” (pages 319–323).

Less obviously, many of the early post-biblical prayers were deeply influenced by *Hekhalot* (“Palace”) and *Merkava* (“Chariot”) mysticism, two esoteric systems that charted the mysteries of creation, the angelic orders, and the innermost chambers of the divine glory.

Undoubtedly, though, the most significant mystical contribution to the prayers is the *Kedusha*, said in three different forms, most notably during the Leader’s Repetition of the Amida. We have noted the two major tributaries of prayer: the spontaneous prayers said by figures in the Hebrew Bible, and the sacrificial service in the Temple. Mysticism is the third, and its most sublime expression is the *Kedusha*, based on the mystical visions of Isaiah (chapter 6) and Ezekiel (chapters 1–3). There are times in the prayers when we are like prophets, others when we are like priests, but there is no more daring leap of faith than during the

◀ *Kedusha*

and afternoon prayers. On Friday evening, in the central blessing of the Amida, we speak of the Shabbat of creation (“the culmination of the creation of heaven and earth”). In the morning we refer to the Shabbat of revelation (when Moses “brought down in his hands two tablets of stone”). In the afternoon we anticipate future redemption (when “You are One, Your name is One” and the people Israel are again one “nation unique on earth”).

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggested that the same sequence is the basis for the threefold structure of the weekday Amida: praise, request, thanks. Praise “emerges from an enraptured soul gazing at the *mysterium magnum* of creation,” request “flows from an aching heart which finds itself in existential depths,” and thanksgiving “is sung by the person who has attained, by the grace of God, redemption.” Creation leads to praise, revelation to request, and redemption to thanksgiving.

In these multiple ways, prayer continually reiterates the basic principles of Jewish faith.

5. Prayer and Study

There is one spiritual activity that the sages regarded as even higher than prayer: namely, study of Torah, God’s word to humanity and His covenant with our ancestors and us (*Shabbat* 10a). The entire *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) is a set of variations on the theme of a life devoted to Torah study. In prayer, we speak to God. Through Torah, God speaks to us. Praying, we speak. Studying, we listen.

From earliest times, the synagogue was a house of study as well as a house of prayer. Gatherings for study (perhaps around the figure of the prophet; see 11 Kings 4:23 and the commentaries of Radak and Ralbag; *Sukka* 27b) may well have preceded formal prayer services by many centuries. Accordingly, interwoven with prayer are acts of study.

The most obvious is the public reading from the Torah, a central part of the Shabbat and Yom Tov services, and in an abridged form on Monday and Thursday mornings and Shabbat afternoons. There are other examples. In the morning blessings before the Verses of Praise, there are two cycles of study, each in three parts: (1) Torah, that is a passage from the Mosaic books; (2) Mishna, the key document of the Oral Law; and (3) Talmud in the broadest sense (pages 11 and 43–55).

◀ In the main

people to charge them with the task of building the Temple; when Ezra convened a national assembly to renew the covenant after the return from Babylonian exile; and when Moses led the Israelites through the Reed Sea. Even the three steps forward we take as we begin the Amida recall the three biblical episodes in which people stepped forward (*vayigash*) as a prelude to prayer: Abraham pleading for the cities of the plain, Judah pleading with Joseph for Benjamin to be set free, and Elijah invoking God against the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel.

We are a people defined by history. We carry our past with us. We relive it in ritual and prayer. We are not lonely individuals, disconnected with past and present. We are characters in the world's oldest continuous story, charged with writing its next chapter and handing it on to those who come after us. The siddur is, among other things, a book of Jewish memory.

8. *Prayer and Faith*

The siddur is also the book of Jewish faith. Scholars of Judaism, noting that it contains little systematic theology, have sometimes concluded that it is a religion of deeds not creeds, acts not beliefs. They were wrong because they were searching in the wrong place. They were looking for a library of works like Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*. They should have looked instead at the prayer book. The home of Jewish belief is the siddur.

At several points, the prayers have been shaped in response to theological controversy. The opening statement in the morning service after *Barekhu*, "who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates all," is a protest against dualism, which had a considerable following in the first four centuries CE in the form of Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Its presence can be traced in the ancient documents discovered in the 1940s, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices. Against dualism, with its vision of perpetual cosmic struggle, Judaism insists that all reality derives from a single source.

The second paragraph of the Amida, with its fivefold reference to the resurrection of the dead, reflects the ancient controversy between the Pharisees and Sadducees. The morning prayer, "My God, the soul You placed within me is pure" (page 7), may be directed against the Pauline doctrine of original sin. The Mishna chapter, "With what wicks may we

Kedusha, when we act out the role of angels singing praises to God in His innermost chambers.

Familiarity breeds inattention, and we can all too easily pass over the *Kedusha* without noticing its astonishing drama. "The ministering angels do not begin to sing praises in heaven until Israel sings praises down here on earth" (*Hullin* 91b). "You," said God through Isaiah, "are My witnesses" (Is. 43:10). Israel is "the people I formed for Myself that they might declare My praise" (*ibid*, 43:20). We are God's angels on earth, His emissaries and ambassadors. The Jewish people, always small and vulnerable, have nonetheless been singled out for the most exalted mission ever entrusted to humankind: to be witnesses, in ourselves, to something beyond ourselves: to be God's "signal of transcendence" in a world in which His presence is often hidden.

This is a mystical idea, and like all mysticism it hovers at the edge of intelligibility. Mysticism is the attempt to say the unsayable, know the unknowable, to reach out in language to a reality that lies beyond the scope of language. Often in the course of history, mysticism has tended to devalue the world of the senses in favor of a more exalted realm of disembodied spirituality. Jewish mysticism did not take this course. Instead it chose to bathe our life on earth in the dazzling light of the divine radiance (*Zohar*, the title of Judaism's most famous mystical text).

7. *Reliving History*

History, too, has left its mark on the siddur. There are passages, indicated in the Commentary, that were born in the aftermath of tragedy or miraculous redemption. This edition of the siddur also includes suggested orders of service for Yom HaAtzma'ut and Yom Yerushalayim, marking the birth of the State of Israel in 1948, and the Six Day War of 1967.

No less significantly, the synagogue service invites us at many points to reenact history. The Verses of Praise begin with the song of celebration sung by King David when he brought the Ark to Jerusalem. The verses we sing when we take the Torah scroll from the Ark and when we return it recall the Israelites' journeys through the wilderness, when they carried the Ark with them. In one of the most fascinating transitions in the service, as we move from private meditation to public prayer (pages 79–83), we recall three epic moments of nation-formation: when David gathered the

The Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*, which comes from a root that means “to come, or bring, close.” The essential problem to which sacrifice is an answer is: how can we come close to God? This is a profound question – perhaps *the* question of the religious life – not simply because of the utter disparity between God’s infinity and our finitude, but also because the very circumstances of life tend to focus our gaze downward to our needs rather than upward to our source. The Hebrew word for universe, *olam*, is connected to the verb meaning “to hide” (see Lev. 4:13; Deut. 22:1). The physical world is a place in which the presence of God is real, yet hidden. Our horizon of consciousness is foreshortened. We focus on our own devices and desires. We walk in God’s light, but often our mind is on other things.

How then do we come close to God? By *an act of renunciation*; by giving something away; specifically, by giving something *back*. The sacrifices of the biblical age were ways in which the individual, or the nation as a whole, in effect said: what we have, God, is really Yours. The world exists because of You. *We* exist because of You. Nothing we have is ultimately ours. The fundamental gesture of sacrifice is, on the face of it, absurd. What we give to God is something that already belongs to Him. As King David said: “Who am I and who are my people that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your hand” (1 Chr. 29:14). Yet to *give back* to God is one of the most profound instincts of the soul. Doing so, we acknowledge our dependency. We cast off the carapace of self-absorption. That is why, in one of its most striking phrases, the Torah speaks of sacrifice as being *rei’ah niho’ah*, “sweet savor” to God.

One of the sweetest savors of parenthood is when a child, by now grown to maturity, brings a parent a gift to express his or her thanks. This too seems absurd. What can a child give a parent that remotely approximates what a parent gives a child, namely life itself? Yet it is so, and the reverse is also true. The cruelest thing a child can do is *not* to acknowledge his or her parents. The Talmud attributes to Rabbi Akiva the phrase *Avinu Malkenu*, “Our Father, our King.” Those two words encapsulate the essence of Jewish worship. God is King – Maker and Sovereign of the vast universe. Yet even before God is our King, He is our Father, our Parent, the One who brought us into being in love, who nurtured and sustained us, who taught us His ways, and who tenderly watches over our destiny.

light?” (pages 329–331), was probably inserted as part of the polemic against the Karaite sect. The Ten Commandments, said daily as part of the Temple service immediately after the Shema, was removed from the prayers when it was used by sectarians to argue that only these ten commandments were commanded by God.

The fact that Jewish faith was written into the prayers, rather than analyzed in works of theology, is of immense significance. We do not analyze our faith: we pray it. We do not philosophize about truth: we sing it. Even Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith – the most famous creed in the history of Judaism – only entered the mainstream of Jewish consciousness when they were turned into a song and included in the siddur as the hymn known as Yigdal. For Judaism, theology becomes real when it becomes prayer. We do not talk *about* God. We talk *to* God.

I have known many atheists. My doctoral supervisor, the late Sir Bernard Williams, described as the most brilliant mind in Britain, was one. He was a good, caring, deeply moral human being, but he could not understand my faith at all. For him, life was ultimately tragic. The universe was blind to our presence, deaf to our prayers, indifferent to our hopes. There is no meaning beyond that which human beings construct for themselves. We are dust on the surface of infinity.

I understood that vision, yet in the end I could not share his belief that it is somehow more honest to despair than to trust, to see existence as an accident rather than as invested with a meaning we strive to discover. Sir Bernard loved ancient Greece; I loved biblical Israel. Greece gave the world tragedy; Israel taught it hope. A people, a person, who can pray is one who, even in the darkest night of the soul, can never ultimately lose hope.

9. *Prayer and Sacrifice*

The connection between prayer and sacrifice is deep. As we have seen, sacrifice is not the only forerunner of our prayers; many prayers were spoken by figures in the Bible. These were said without any accompanying offering. Yet the sacrificial system is a major tributary of the Jewish river of prayer. After the destruction of the Second Temple, prayer became a substitute for sacrifice. It is *avoda shebalev*, “the sacrificial service of the heart.” Yet it is just this feature of the prayers that many find difficult to understand or find uplifting. What, then, was sacrifice?

for we have made the journey back to our source, to the One who gives life to all. Distant, we have come close. That is prayer as sacrifice, *korban*, giving back to God a token of what He has given us, thereby coming to see existence itself as a gift, to be celebrated and sanctified.

10. *Kavana: Directing the Mind*

Prayer is more than saying certain words in the right order. It needs concentration, attention, engagement of mind and heart, and the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Without devotion, said Rabbi Bahye ibn Pakuda, prayer is like a body without a soul. The key Hebrew word here is *kavana*, meaning mindfulness, intention, focus, direction of the mind. In the context of prayer, it means several different things.

The most basic level is *kavana le-shem mitzva*, which means, having the intention to fulfill a *mitzva*. This means that we do not act for social or aesthetic reasons. We pray because we are commanded to pray. Generally in Judaism there is a long-standing debate about whether the commandments require *kavana*, but certainly prayer does, because it is supremely an act of the mind.

At a second level, *kavana* means understanding the words (*perush hamilim*). At least the most important sections of prayer require *kavana* in this sense. Without it, the words we say would be mere sounds. Understanding the words is, of course, made much easier by the existence of translations and commentaries.

A third level relates to context. How do I understand my situation when I pray? Maimonides states this principle as follows: “The mind should be freed from all extraneous thoughts and the one who prays should realize that he is standing before the Divine Presence.” These are essential elements of at least the Amida, the prayer par excellence in which we are conscious of standing before God. That is why we take three steps forward at the beginning, and three back at the end – as if we were entering, then leaving, sacred space.

The fourth level of *kavana* is not merely saying the words but meaning them, affirming them. Thus, for example, while saying the first paragraph of the Shema, we “accept of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven” – declaring our allegiance to God as the supreme authority in our lives. In the second paragraph, we “accept of the yoke of the commandments.” The

Sacrifice – the gift we bring to God – is the gift of the made to its Maker, the owned to its Owner, the child to its Parent. If creation is an act of love, sacrifice is an acknowledgment of that love.

The late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik emphasized the difference between *ma’aseh mitzva*, the external act specified by a commandment, and *kiyum mitzva*, the actual fulfillment of a commandment. When the Temple stood, for example, a penitent would bring a guilt- or sin-offering to atone for his sin: that was the external act. The fulfillment of the commandment, though, lay in confession and contrition, acts of the mind and will. In biblical times, the sacrificial order was the external act, but the internal act – acknowledgment, dependency, recognition, thanks, praise – was essential to its fulfillment. That is why Judaism was able to survive the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial order. The external act could no longer be performed, but the internal act remained. That is the link between sacrifice and prayer.

The difference between prayer-as-request and prayer-as-sacrifice is that request *seeks*, sacrifice *gives*. The prophets asked, usually on behalf of the people as a whole, for forgiveness, deliverance, and blessing. The priests who offered sacrifices in the Temple asked for nothing. Sacrificial prayer is the giving back to God what God already owns: our lives, our days, our world. Prayer is creation’s gift to its Creator.

The prophets were critical of the sacrificial system. They reserved for it some of their most lacerating prose. Yet none proposed its abolition, because what they opposed was not the sacrificial act, but the *ma’aseh* without the *kiyum*, the outer act without the inner acknowledgment that gives the act its meaning and significance. The idea that God can be worshiped through externalities alone is pagan, and there is nothing worse than the intrusion of paganism into the domain of holiness itself. Then as now, the sign of paganism is the coexistence of religious worship with injustice and a lack of compassion in the dealings between the worshiper and the world.

Sacrifice, like prayer, is a transformative act. We should leave the synagogue, as our ancestors once left the Temple, seeing ourselves and the universe differently, freshly conscious that the world is God’s work, the Torah God’s word, our fellow believers God’s children, and our fellow human beings God’s image. We emerge refocused and reenergized,

11. *Jacob's Ladder*

Prayer is a journey that has been described in many ways. According to the mystics, it is a journey through the four levels of being – Action, Formation, Creation and Emanation. Rabbi Jacob Emden worked out an elaborate scheme in which the prayers represent a movement from the outer courtyards to the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem. According to everyone, the stages of prayer constitute an ascent and descent, reaching their highest level in the middle, in the Shema and Amida.

The metaphor that, to me, captures the spirit of prayer more than any other is Jacob's dream in which, alone at night, fleeing danger and far from home, he saw a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending. He woke and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God; this is the gate to heaven" (Gen. 28:10–17).

Our sages said that "this place" was Jerusalem. That is midrashic truth. But there is another meaning, the plain one, no less transfiguring. The verb the Torah uses, *vayifga*, means "to happen upon, as if by chance." "This place" was any place. Any place, any time, even the dark of a lonely night, can be a place and time for prayer. If we have the strength to dream and then, awakening, refuse to let go of the dream, then here, now, where I stand, can be the gate to heaven.

Prayer is a ladder and we are the angels. If there is one theme sounded throughout the prayers, it is creation–revelation–redemption, or ascent–summit–descent. In the Verses of Praise, we climb from earth to heaven by meditating on creation. Like a Turner or Monet landscape, the psalms let us see the universe bathed in light, but *this* light is not the light of beauty but of holiness – the light the sages say God made on the first day and "hid for the righteous in the life to come." Through some of the most magnificent poetry ever written, we see the world as God's masterpiece, suffused with His radiance, until we reach a crescendo in Psalm 150 with its thirteen-fold repetition of "Praise" in a mere thirty-five words.

By the time we reach *Barekhu* and the blessings of the Shema we have neared the summit. Now we are in heaven with the angels. We have reached revelation. The Divine Presence is close, almost tangible. We speak of love in one of the most hauntingly beautiful of blessings, "Great love" with its striking phrase: "Our Father, merciful Father, the Merciful,

word *Amen* means roughly, "I affirm what has been said." In prayer we put ourselves into the words. We make a commitment. We declare our faith, our trust, and our dependency. We mean what we say.

There are, of course, higher reaches of *kavana*. Mystics and philosophers throughout the ages developed elaborate meditative practices before and during prayer. But at its simplest, *kavana* is the practiced harmony of word and thought, body and mind. This is how Judah HaLevi described it:

The tongue agrees with the thought, and does not overstep its bounds, does not speak in prayer in a mere mechanical way as the starling and the parrot, but every word is uttered thoughtfully and attentively. This moment forms the heart and fruit of his time, while the other hours represent the way that leads to it. He looks forward to its approach, because while it lasts he resembles the spiritual beings, and is removed from merely animal existence. Those three times of daily prayer are the fruit of his day and night, and the Sabbath is the fruit of the week, because it has been appointed to establish the connection with the Divine Spirit and to serve God in joy, not in sadness... (*Kuzari*, III:5, as translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld)

Of course it does not always happen. It is told that on one occasion Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev went up to one of his followers after the prayers, held out his hand and said "Welcome home." "But I haven't been anywhere," said the disciple. "Your body hasn't been anywhere," said the Rebbe, "but your mind has been far away. That is why I wished it, 'Welcome home.'"

Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk once asked: "Why does it say in the Shema, 'These words shall be *on* your heart'? Should it not say, 'These words shall be *in* your heart'? The answer is that the heart is not always open. Therefore we should lay these words on our heart, so that when it opens, they will be there, ready to enter."

Prayer requires practice. That is implicit in defining prayer as *avoda shebalev*, "service of the heart." The word *avoda*, service, also means hard work, labor, strenuous activity. We have to work at prayer. But there are also times when the most inarticulate prayer, said from the heart, pierces the heavens. What matters is seriousness and honesty. "The LORD is close to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth."