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Why We Pray: Contemporary Views on Prayer

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Acknowledgments

"A prayer is the articulation of something very particular at the core of one's being, flung out into the universe. Perhaps it finds a mark, perhaps not. The essential thing is the articulation and the flinging." - Merle Feld

This work would not have been possible without the support and guidance I received from many:

When Larry Hoffman agreed to work with me, I expected to learn just as much from every conversation we had as I would from any article or book. This indeed turned out to be true. His thoughtfulness, kindness, good humor, and incredibly vast experience with and knowledge of liturgy, worship, and ritual made it an absolute pleasure to work with him. I am forever thankful for the time and support Larry offered me, especially in the moments that were personally challenging, which were unfortunately plentiful. I appreciate his belief in my potential to create and of my emerging rabbinate.

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During this process, both my father, David Harry Ellenson, and brother, Micah Samuel Ellenson, died. Both rabbis and educators, their deaths showed me, among many other things, how prayers can reach far beyond what we can actually see. I pray that something I have articulated has been flung in their direction.

Introduction

This thesis began not only from an academic curiosity, but from a place of profound personal loss. In the wake of my father's death, I found myself reflecting on the legacy of both my parents – my father's lifelong commitment to making Judaism meaningful in the modern world, and my mother's ongoing dedication to helping others live spiritually connected lives. Their influence – deeply woven into my own identity and nearly impossible to capture in words – shaped the core questions of this thesis: How can prayer remain relevant in a modern age marked by doubt and distraction? And how can we, as individuals and communities, feel connected to God in moments of prayer, however and wherever they occur?

While much has been written about the content, history, and evolution of Jewish prayer – its words, its forms, its traditions – we speak far less about *why* we pray. What compels people, especially in contemporary contexts, to turn to prayer? Even as modern sensibilities challenge the literal efficacy of prayer, prayer continues to hold deep meaning for many. I also find prayer meaningful and have had many types of prayer experiences in my life, but still, I have found myself struggling to define what prayer is and how it functions. I had questions, but not yet the language to ask them. This thesis seeks to understand the continued relevance and resonance of prayer and to explore how prayer can offer connection – to ourselves, to others, and to God.

My first chapter does cite classical Jewish texts directly, often with my own interpretations, but it is primarily a synopsis of other, representative, and typical accounts of Jewish prayer, my goal being to survey what is generally already being said about the lengthy, diverse, and complex Jewish attitude to prayer. Through these accounts, I look at our classical Jewish textual heritage and more current and popular literature on prayer. That is to say, I explore

how traditional Jewish views have been interpreted by modern scholars, and summarize briefly the contributions of some 20th-century theologians and thinkers.

At the heart of this thesis, however, are the voices of contemporary liturgists and spiritual leaders – people who are actively shaping prayer today, and not just Jews, but some Catholic and Protestant voices, as well. Through interviews with Gail Ramshaw, Gordon Lathrop, Kimberly Salico-Diehl, Janet Walton, Elana Arian, and Sonja Pilz, I hope to have uncovered further answers to such broad and essential questions as: Why do we pray? What does prayer accomplish? Do theology and liturgy need to be consistent? What are the limits of changing traditional liturgy? Ultimately, this thesis is an exploration of contemporary views on prayer and theology, including my own, in a time when its relevance can no longer be assumed.

Fred Rogers, when entering his set every morning, would pray, "Dear God, May some part of this be yours."[1] I, too, pray that some small part of this work encourages reflection, connection, and, perhaps, even a moment of prayer.

[1] Carvel Wallace, host, Finding Fred, season 1, episode 10, "I like You As You Are," iHeart Media, December 24, 2019, 44 min., 20 sec., https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/i-like-you-as-you-are/id1603260760?i=1000547471089.

Chapter 1: The Role of Prayer in Jewish Tradition

The concept of prayer has long been central to Jewish tradition, both as a communal ritual and as a deeply personal expression of faith. One of the most significant Jewish texts that embodies this tradition is the siddur, a prayer book that is held in the hands of Jews worldwide. The siddur is often the most familiar and accessible book in the Jewish home and synagogue, and it offers a window into the rhythm and structure of Jewish liturgy, encapsulating the intersection of personal devotion and communal worship. The first extant siddur in our possession – and the one that continues to form a basis for what we use today is Seder Rav Amram, the product of Amram Gaon of Babylonia (modern Baghdad), in 860. But it grew through time, as later generations of Jews added their own contributions to the text. The siddur, however, offers no rationale for its contents: it simply lists the prayers to be said for each and every official occasion, whether at home or in the synagogue – under the assumption, apparently, that prayer is an obvious human activity, and one demanded by God, in any event. We must look elsewhere for Judaism's classic explanations of prayer's origin and purpose.

Biblical and Rabbinic Interpretations

Following the stories of Adam and Eve, the exile from the Garden of Eden, and the complicated and violent relationship between Cain and Abel, and just before encountering a long passage that describes Adam and Eve's progeny, we encounter the concept of prayer – or more specifically, calling out to God – for the first time: "It was only *then* that people began calling upon God's name."[2] The temporal marker "then" implies that prayer is not immediate to

[2] Genesis 4:26; italics mine unless otherwise stated, all translations follow NJPS 1999.

creation, but emerges in response to human complexity – violence, exile, survival, and the longing for divine proximity.

Notably, the verse is framed in collective terms: "People began…" – suggesting a communal practice, rather than an isolated act of spiritual expression. The identity of the first person to pray is left unnamed, perhaps intentionally, reflecting a view that prayer is not the domain of a single figure, but a shared human impulse. Rabbinic sources interpret Genesis 4:26 as a significant theological turning point. According to Sifre Devarim, this moment signifies the beginning of a conscious relationship with God via verbal articulation.[3] In naming the deity "Adonai," a personal, singular relationship was created.

Importantly, the biblical account does not record a divine response. This narrative silence becomes a foundation for the rabbinic understanding of prayer. Traditional Jewish thinkers and writers did of course believe that God could hear human prayers. Although the Rabbis disagree on which blessing should be said in times of trouble, all of them end with the same description: Blessed are You, Adonai, who hears prayer.[4] Louis Jacobs emphasizes that prayer, in this framework, is not an attempt to change God or the wider world, but to enter into a relational dynamic: "God desires man to express his love of Him, dependence on Him, and wish to commune with Him in this form."[5]

One of the most profound biblical models for prayer in Rabbinic tradition is the story of Hannah. Found in the Book of Samuel, the story of Hannah's prayer is often cited by the rabbis as a foundational example of *tefillah b'kavanah* – prayer with intention. Hannah, deeply

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[3] Sifre Devarim 43:18

[4] Berakhot 29a.

[5] Louis Jacobs, *Principles of the Jewish Faith: An Analytical Study* (Vallentine Mitchell, 1964), 350.

distressed by her inability to conceive, prays silently in the Temple at Shiloh, pouring out her soul to God. Her plea is not just for a child, but for divine intervention and help, and she makes a vow to dedicate her son to God's service if her prayer is answered.[6]

Unlike the more formalized prayers of the Liturgy as we have it in the siddur, Hannah's prayer is deeply personal, heartfelt, and spontaneous. The formalized prayers of today are the product of rabbis, not the bible, where official ritual was sacrificial. But Rabbinic literature sought Rabbinic justification and models for their formal liturgical practice, and they found them in such places as the stories of Adam and Eve, and Hannah.

In Rabbinic literature, the story of Hannah serves as a paradigm for Jewish prayer in general. The Talmud teaches that her prayer is an example of the ideal balance between *kavanah* and *keva*.[7] While her words were not scripted, her emotional sincerity and intentionality are palpable. The rabbis emphasized that prayer should not be mechanical or rote but should come from the heart, as Rabbi Eliezer is quoted as saying, "If one's prayer is fixed, it is not supplication."[8] Both spontaneity and personal expression within the fixed structure of prayer are necessary.

Hannah's story also underscores the role of prayer as a means of establishing a relationship with God, rather than merely a transactional request for a favor. The rabbis of the Talmud also interpret her gesture of silent prayer as an example of how one can connect with God even when the words of the prayer are not spoken aloud. Biblical prayer was necessarily spontaneous and extemporaneous. Fixed texts – even when citing biblical passages, such as the familiar Sh'ma, are the product of the later Rabbinic period. Yet even for the rabbis who valued

[6] 1 Samuel 1:9-20.

[7] Berakhot 31a.

[8] Mishnah Berakhot 4:4.

fixed prayer wording, Hannah's quiet supplication became a model for how prayer transcends the formalities of language and touches God by its immediacy.

Hannah offers the Rabbis a model for how to pray with meaning. Rachel Adler points out that this account is the only incident in the entire Tanach where a person prays in a place where sacrifices had been offered: "As such, it affirms for rabbinic Judaism its own continuity with tradition, the continuity between prayer and sacrifice, ritual word and ritual deed, between the synagogue rites of Tabernacle and Temple."[9] Adler and other feminist commentators have highlighted the radical nature of this moment, noting that it grants spiritual authority to a previously marginalized figure – an ordinary woman – creating a precedent for prayers offered by lay people.

Worship as outlined in the Talmud creates a connection to the biblical stories and also creates a new path for connecting with God without performing sacrifices. The essential lesson from Hannah's story remains: prayer must be infused with *kavanah*, the intentional connection between the worshiper and the divine.

The Rabbis later institutionalized prayer as a substitute for the sacrificial cult. The Amidah, recited three times daily, was aligned with the morning, afternoon, and evening offerings in the Temple. As such, rabbinic prayer maintained continuity with ancient ritual while reorienting Jewish worship toward text and speech. This transformation enabled diaspora communities – and communities within the land of Israel, too – to maintain religious cohesion despite the destruction of the Temple.

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[9] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Beacon Press, 1998), 64.

The Role of the Siddur in Jewish Prayer

Contrary to expectations, neither the Torah nor the Talmud is the best-known book in a Jewish library. Scholars are intimate with both, but regular everyday Jews likely are not. By contrast, there is one book that every Jew is likely to have encountered: the siddur, the best-known book of the Jewish library. Some may be intimately familiar with the words and some are not. Regardless of familiarity, though, it is physically held by anyone who walks into a synagogue service. Every synagogue has at least one kind of prayerbook, of course. But so does almost every Jewish home. The siddur might be a child's or one from a long-ago bar or bat mitzvah, but there it often sits on a shelf; perhaps it is even used or consulted occasionally.

There are thousands of different versions of the siddur. Reform Judaism in Germany in the 19th Century alone produced more than 150. Every Hasidic sect has its own. Each one contains its own understanding of Jewish faith, observance, and practice. As Adin Steinsaltz describes it,

> The Siddur is like a garland…It includes sections that reflect the fundamentals of the Jewish faith, and those relating to the field of religious law. There are some that describe a world outlook, and others that recount the central events in Jewish history. The siddur contains sections of exalted poetry, and matters of ritual procedure. There are prayers that deal with the most intimate details of individual needs and problems, supplications reflecting the sorrows and aspirations of the entire nation, and prayers that touch upon the entire cosmos…. There are selections taken from the Torah, the Prophets and Writings, from the Mishnah and the Talmud, from the Midrash and kabbalistic works, from the stylized and

> complex poetry of medieval times, and from the private and personal prayers of Jewish sages.[10]

Regardless of the version or its aesthetic, and of which texts are included or excluded, the siddur serves a similar function: it universally invites Jews to connect with God through structured prayer. And not just God; but with other Jews worldwide, as well, as the following anecdote reveals.

I once found myself visiting a small synagogue on a Friday night in Rabat, Morocco. As I entered, I was greeted by an elderly man, who wished me a very quick "Shabbat shalom." Based on his expression, it appeared as though the congregation did not get many visitors. I proceeded to the women's section and asked a man I could see through the trellis for a siddur. He looked at me wide-eyed, seemingly shocked that I would want one, but handed a siddur to me nonetheless. I had never been in this space before; the tunes were unfamiliar; and I had never seen this version of a siddur before; but I was able to find the right page with the help of the one other woman there, and the service then felt familiar enough to me that I was able to follow along. In that small synagogue in Morocco, far away from home, and using a siddur I had never seen before, my soul still felt connected to the Jewish People. The siddur with which I am most accustomed was altogether different, but knowing the Hebrew words, I could easily feel connected to a congregation thousands of miles from home. Using the siddur felt grounding. Steinsaltz puts it this way: "Though other books may be more highly valued and admired, none has been so well loved and so uniquely able to penetrate to the very depths of the soul as the siddur."[11]

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[10] Adin Steinsaltz, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, (Schocken Books, 2000), 4-5.

[11] Ibid., 3.

The siddur, in its fixed structure, exemplifies the concept of *keva* – the "fixed" or "permanent" aspects of Jewish liturgy. This concept, however, has evolved over time. In its early stages, *keva* referred to the fixed thematic sequence of prayers, not necessarily the exact wording, which could vary depending on the prayer leader or occasion. Today, the term *keva* is often understood as the routine, repetitive recitation of fixed prayers. These fixed prayers are essential because they provide a structure and framework for communal worship. By contrast, *kavanah* (which once denoted the prayer leader's ad hoc choice of wording) now refers to the intentionality and mindfulness with which one approaches prayer. Although religious traditions vary in this regard, Judaism has held that the balance between these two elements – *keva* (structure) and *kavanah* (intention) – is vital for a meaningful prayer experience.

In antiquity, before the widespread use of written *Siddurim*, Jewish prayer was highly improvisational. The words spoken by prayer leaders could change from service to service, depending on the situation. Yet, the themes and structure of the service remained constant, providing a sense of permanence even amid verbal innovation. This fixed order is repeatedly reflected in the Mishnah and Talmud, which emphasize the importance of maintaining *keva* in liturgical practice, even when the exact words vary. While the words of prayer were flexible, the overarching themes ensured continuity across generations.

There is gain as well as loss here. Today, the printed siddur has mostly done away with the spontaneous aspect of prayer. While this change has provided consistency, it has also led to challenges in maintaining *kavanah*, particularly during repetitive daily prayers. By simply reading the words on a page, we do not always feel connected to the prayers we are saying. As Louis Jacobs points out, "No human being is capable of maintaining a consistent level of kavanah…Without the formal structure of the prayer service, kavanah would be deprived of its

point of departure."[12] *Keva*, by providing a framework, enables *kavanah* to flourish. Yet, as prayer becomes more routinized, it risks becoming mechanical, and the spiritual depth of the experience can be lost. Mordecai Kaplan, the originator of Reconstructionist Judaism says it clearly: "With prayers that are formalized and repeated three times a day, year in and out…it is impossible to expect the average person to exercise kavanah."[13] How can prayer be a meaningful experience if we know exactly what to expect? We should look more carefully at the loss.

The Rabbis knew this, too, as was mentioned earlier. As certain prayers became more routine and set, the Rabbis themselves discussed how to maintain *kavanah*. Rabbi Aha, a rabbi from the fourth century, said, "A new prayer should be said every day."[14] We cannot simply recite the words printed on the page. We must bring our hearts and minds into prayer, as well. Spontaneity and innovation are necessary for a full prayer experience.

This interplay between *keva* and *kavanah* is demonstrated in the Shabbat service I attended in Morocco. While the siddur I used was unfamiliar, the structure of the service felt grounded in the same themes I had experienced in other synagogues. *Keva* allowed me to find my place in the prayers, even without knowing the specific traditions or melodies. At the same time, *kavanah* helped me to connect while in an unfamiliar context. This balance allows for both continuity and personal connection in prayer, which is crucial for maintaining spiritual depth.

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[12] Louis Jacobs, *Principles of the Jewish Faith*, 12.

[13] Jack Cohen, *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the Twentieth Century*, (Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1962), 16.

[14] Berakhot Yerushalmi 4a

Theological Reflections on the Nature of Prayer

Throughout Jewish intellectual history, prayer has remained a subject of deep theological reflection. Maimonides understood prayer as a rational response to the existence of a perfect and unchanging God.[15] Maimonides's problem was unique in that following Aristotelian philosophy, he held that God (his Jewish equivalent of Aristotle's unmoved mover) is, by definition, unchangeable. How then can our prayers be expected to change God's mind? Or even to influence God's decisions, given the fact that God already knows everything before we say it? And yet, we are commanded to pray. Why? For Maimonides, prayer is primarily a means of shaping human character and moral behavior.

In contrast, Abraham Joshua Heschel, for example, reframed prayer as a fundamentally existential act. Heschel suggests that prayer provides the time and space to sense the presence of God, and to see the universe from God's point of view, helping humans rise to a higher level of being.[16] Heschel described prayer not as a request, but as "an act of self-examination" and a moment of spiritual awareness. "Prayer may not save us." He wrote, "But prayer may make us worthy of being saved." Prayer, then, becomes a mode of transcendence--a practice that opens individuals to moral transformation and heightened perception of the sacred.

Jakob Petuchowski similarly emphasized the interiority of prayer, arguing that even wordless emotions – such as awe, gratitude, or fear – constitute genuine spiritual engagement. He contended that liturgical language serves as a scaffold for inner experience, enabling worshipers to give form to ineffable feelings: "Prayer is an immediate and instinctive reaction of

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[15] *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:32.

[16] Jack Cohen, *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the Twentieth Century*, 113.

the individual person to situations that demand his or her gratitude, concern, fear, wonder, or any other basic emotion…. The person is often unaware that he is engaged in prayer."[17]

Feminist theologian Marcia Falk proposed a departure from traditional theistic models altogether, offering non-hierarchical, non-anthropomorphic liturgy grounded in immanence and mutuality. Her feminist perspective obliges her to question the hierarchy inherent in the traditional view of an all-powerful God who is distinctly "other" to lesser beings like ourselves. She therefore prefers seeing prayer as a way to feel connected to a greater whole: "It is a reaching inward and outward at once. Inward to the core of myself, to feelings, thoughts, and in ineffable sense of being-ness. And outward, to my participation in something much larger than myself…"[18] Falk's description reshapes our understanding of what it means to be in conversation with that which cannot be named. For Falk, prayer need not be directed to a supernatural entity; rather, it is a poetic act of aligning oneself with the interconnectedness of all beings. Her reimagining of prayer exemplifies the evolving theological pluralism within contemporary Jewish thought. Yet even for her, as with Heschel and Petuchowski, prayer remains an opportunity for reflection, for holiness, and for feeling closer to oneself and to God.

Prayer as Part of Collective Identity and Community

From a sociological perspective, we can say that prayer also serves as a mechanism of communal identity and cohesion. Emile Durkheim identified ritual as a means of producing collective effervescence – a sense of unity that transcends individual experience. Jewish liturgy

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[17] Ibid., 127-8.

[18] Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*, (CCAR Press, 2017), xxiv.

is almost exclusively composed in the plural voice ("We have sinned," "Grant us peace," "Our God and God of our ancestors"), reinforcing the notion that prayer is both a communal obligation and a shared cultural memory. As much as prayer is a connection between God and a human, it is also a collaborative experience between the worshiper and the praying community, and not just horizontally in space, but vertically, too, reaching back through past generations who prayed the same way.

Participation in prayer also situates the individual within a historical narrative that extends across generations. According to Eugene Borowitz, "Jewish prayer includes joining one's hearts with the hearts of one's people, and through their words, to the hearts of those Jews who by their faithful continuity made possible one's own Jewish life."[19] The use of traditional texts, such as the siddur, links contemporary practitioners to ancestors who recited the same words under vastly different circumstances. This temporal continuity imbues prayer with both symbolic and ethical weight: to pray is to inherit and transmit a legacy.

Prayer and Transformation

Prayer in Jewish tradition is not merely about words uttered to a divine being; rather, it serves as a catalyst for internal transformation and moral awakening. Hasidic sources emphasize prayer's transformative potential. The Ba'al Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, taught that prayer must lead to ethical and emotional refinement. "If, after praying, you remain the same as before, you have not truly prayed."[20] The true goal of prayer, therefore, is to affect change within the individual and then throughout the world. This concept is echoed and deepened repeatedly by

[19] Jack Cohen, *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the Twentieth Century*, 160.

[20] Ibid., 200.

modern theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, who insisted, “Prayer is no panacea, no substitute for action. It is, rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness.”[21] In this light, prayer is not about passively waiting for divine intervention but about illuminating the moral and spiritual path forward. Leo Baeck especially situated prayer within a framework of ethical responsibility: “The first and essential thing about prayer is not to pray for the sake of what we want to have, but for the sake of what we should be.”[22] Prayer, then, is not an escape from the world, but a return to it – with greater compassion, clarity, and conviction.

Even when faced with uncertainty, suffering, or injustice, prayer invites the practitioner to imagine a reality not yet realized, aligning the self with values of justice and morality. This forward-facing quality of prayer has led some to see worship itself as a kind of spiritual activism--a way of committing, both individually and communally, to bring about the change that prayers articulate. In this sense, Jewish prayer is not static or resigned; it is an expression of responsibility, agency, and hope, guiding the worshiper to become an active participant in shaping the world.

Conclusion

Jewish prayer emerged not from rigid doctrinal systems, but from the deep currents of human experience--longing, gratitude, grief, and awe. It developed across centuries, evolving from spontaneous cries of the heart into structured liturgy, while always retaining an openness to

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[21] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Prayer*, 1945, *Open Siddur Project*, 21 August 2018, https://opensiddur.org/miscellanea/pedagogy/prayer-by-abraham-joshua-heschel-1945/.

[22] Leo Baeck, *Prayer in Judaism (Gebet im Judentum)*, 1935, *Open Siddur Project*, 25 February 2011, https://opensiddur.org/miscellanea/pedagogy/gebet-im-judentum-prayer-in-judaism-by-leo-baeck-1935/.

reinvention and theological re-imagining. Whether understood as divine communication, communal ritual, or a form of ethical self-formation, prayer remains a central, enduring feature of Jewish religious life. Its history reflects the dynamism of Judaism itself: rooted in tradition, responsive to change, and perpetually in dialogue with the human condition.

At its core, Jewish prayer is a complex, dynamic, and deeply human act – bridging the ancient with the modern, the individual with the collective, the fixed forms of *keva* with the inner intention of *kavanah*. From the elemental callings of Genesis to Hannah's impassioned plea; from the carefully crafted words of the siddur to the meditative reflections of modern seekers; prayer has always been about connection – to God, to community, and to self. Modern thinkers remind us that prayer continues to evolve, making room for individuality, theological inquiry, and moral responsibility. In a world shaped by rapid change and deep uncertainty, prayer remains a powerful spiritual "technology" – offering the language to grieve, to hope, to act, and to imagine a different future. Through it, Jewish life sustains its rhythm, its memory, and its aspiration.

Chapter Two: Contemporary Worshipers

During Spring 2025, I conducted interviews with people I would call professional pray-ers: liturgists, clergy, musicians, and poets. In focusing on people who think about prayer regularly, I hoped to better understand the state of prayer today – how people pray and what they think about praying and prayer. These women and one man are Jewish and Christian (Lutheran, Catholic, and Baptist) and range in age from 40s to 80s. This variety led me to a greater understanding of what prayer is and can be, how prayer functions in different communities and for different people, and what God (or the Divine or the Universe) means to people who are not necessarily part of my own worshiping community. My goal was to expand the usual set of discussants, and thereby expand as well what my own concept of prayer has been. How do professional liturgists and musicians/composers understand prayer? And how do at least some modern and liturgically informed Christians understand what they are doing when they pray?

I spoke with each interviewee about some combination of topics that I had chosen in advance, but often much more than what I could have predicted came up as the conversation progressed. Topics included: What is your definition of prayer? Does God hear our prayers? What words do you like to use for God? What changes to liturgy are acceptable and what changes are not? What is the role of community in worship? And what are some particularly meaningful moments of prayer that have stood out? The following summaries encapsulate some small part of what my informants shared.

Gail Ramshaw

Gail Ramshaw is an internationally known Lutheran liturgist who has written widely on a feminist critique of religion and prayer wording; and the role of the lectionary in prayer. She comes from a Conservative Lutheran background, and can be seen as advocating change while honoring tradition. She expresses a strong desire both to keep tradition alive and to innovate.

When I asked her about what prayer is, Gail told me, "Throughout history, most Christians agree that speaking to God is what happens on Sunday morning. Texts – both those that are classical and those that are new and improved – are a response to God. One word for that response is prayer." She also described how her daughter, a pastor, says, "I don't know what prayer is, but I'm called to do it."

Gail's faith is evident. She feels called to believe that God hears prayers, Reading the Bible is how Gail hears God and she thinks that the community as one replies on Sunday mornings. Gail's own home-based personal prayer practice is also quite comprehensive. She prays every morning with her husband, Gordon Lathrop (whom I interviewed also – see below), at their kitchen table, and at night, they pray for blessings for every person with whom they have interacted that day. But she does not think that God answers individuals: "God is not sitting at a big desk receiving emails and responding if God feels like it. It's not a theological position for me."

Gail was honest about her doubts concerning God; she asked, "Is there a God? Belief is not a thing out of which one speaks with confidence." Gail explained further that faith is taking a stand amidst doubt; and that certainty destroys faith. She told me that Christians are taught to

understand prayer as speaking to Jesus, but she does not have a strong Christ piety. For her, metaphor is much more effective: "God is unspeakable and beyond words. If we are required to use words, we need to admit that the words are approximating what we're trying to say." Religious language, symbols, and legends become the language of the one saying it. Gail struggles with an anthropomorphized God, a view that she believes has a number of pitfalls. As she put it, "Imagining God as Zeus is easy, but it does a disservice to us. That doesn't help us with the honesty of doubt." There are undoubtedly a countless number of Christians who would not feel comfortable speaking honestly of their doubt, but Gail is not one of them, and she feels supported in her position by her Lutheran heritage, because (as she sees it) complete certainty is not found in the Lutheran tradition. She is constantly trying to reconcile doubt and faith, but she always goes back to church on Sunday mornings. She is not in the business of proving that God does or does not exist.

Metaphor is a critical component of Gail's conception of God and of prayers. "Metaphor is all we have," she said, speaking with absolute certainty. When writing prayers, Gail uses imagery that can be found in biblical sources. If the prayer follows a reading of scripture, she tries to use those images. For example, if it follows a reading of burning bush, then God is the fire; if the congregation is imagining a world of justice and peace, God is a prince of peace; if nature imagery permeates the reading, then God might be the mother of a condor. For great mystics, Gail explained, God is the dark night of the soul because "when you've been betrayed by everything you've been taught about God, that's where God resides."

Gail has been one of the primary writers of Lutheran prayer that uses feminine pronouns and describes God with more expansive terminology. She recognizes that saying God is a

mother, rather than a father, is an intrinsically feminist statement. Some churches have been more accommodating of that shift than others. And for some communities, imagining God as mother has also held more power than in other communities. The national Lutheran Church is very hesitant to provide texts where God is described as mother. Gail also recognizes that she may have one intention as a liturgical writer, but when a community says the prayer, any religious language, symbol, or legend that is used becomes the language of the person saying it. When composing a prayer, she picks an appropriate metaphor and often "mother" is one of them, but so are "waterfall," "castle," and "bread." Gail told me a story about putting her children to bed one night: in their prayers, they listed everyone in their family, and at the end Gail included castle as a metaphor for God (after all, a fortress is often used as a metaphor for God in Psalms). Her son quickly replied, "God is not a castle, God is God!"

Gail also recognizes the limits and challenges of metaphor and self-identifies as a traditionalist. She is critical of some of the changes made by other feminist liturgists. The implicit message that God as mother is wonderful while God as father is terrible, is not honest for her. There is power and danger in traditional language, just as there is power and danger in new language. Gail does not believe that prayer is the proper vehicle to smash over people's heads as a means to demonstrate that their belief is not right. There must be education and engagement with the text to bring about change in one's liturgical leanings. Gail likes to honor tradition but adds modern language when writing.

While there is no absolutely set Lutheran liturgy, the traditional service outline (the *ordo*, the Christian term paralleling the Jewish *keva*) is helpful for Gail**.** It begins with prayers for the Church, then the Earth, followed by prayers for the leaders of nations, all people who are sick

and suffering, and finishing with those who have died. Martin Luther was resistant to a national church enforcing a single way of worshiping, and modern Lutherans remember that, so no single prayerbook is universally required, although one is provided. One of the challenges of personal prayers that are shared publicly, though, is that personal prayers can help us learn only about the spirituality of individual members, not the community as a whole. Using new prayers alone "deprives communities of great treasures." She lamented seminary education in those divinity schools that do not teach the traditional prayers: "If they are not taught the tradition, it's hard to see the value in it." Ultimately, Gail prays using the best of the tradition and finding a way to say what the tradition intends in American language that is meaningful; and then adding to it through prayers of her own making, using metaphorical language from the many sources at her disposal: biblical prototypes, medieval mystics, literature in general, and instances drawn from the contemporary world that she inhabits.

Gordon Lathrop

Like his wife, Gail Ramshaw, Gordon Lathrop too is a world-renowned Lutheran liturgist, but best known for his many books and articles on liturgical theology. "All prayer is praise and lament," Gordon told me shortly after our conversation started. As explanation, he named a poem, "Bitter-sweet," by George Herbert (1593-1633), an early poet in the Church of England and a younger contemporary of Shakespeare, who represented a turn to medieval metaphysics. Gordon asked if he could read me the poem. Of course, I was more than happy to oblige. So Gordon read:

'Bitter-sweet'

AH my deare angrie Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve:
And all my sowre-sweet dayes
I will lament, and love.

He closed his book, and said, "Imagine that as a way to walk through life." But I did not have to imagine, for here was someone showing me exactly how to do just that.

Gordon – not just a theologian of note, but also a pastor of the Lutheran Church, and a retired professor of liturgy – believes that a full prayer practice is inclusive of both thanksgiving and beseeching. He gave me a number of biblical examples of this, particularly from Psalms, but also our own Jewish *Birkat Hamazon* which he has studied carefully: we give thanks for our meal and also beseech God to restore Jerusalem.

Prayer, for Gordon, is a practice of hope. It is often a communal liturgical act, but he also finds ways that prayer walks with him through life in more private moments. Gordon said, "Prayer enables an honest approach to oneself and the world." He claimed that he is unsure if prayer changes anything, but it is the ability to reach out with hope that an honest relationship with God can develop and evolve. His version of an honest relationship should not come as a surprise: Gordon said it is one that is full of praise and complaint. He cited Paul, who talks about praying without ceasing, which Gordon understands to mean being in the world with thanksgiving and beseeching: "We can praise and then let everything be, even if there is something we want to have." Prayers of thanksgiving, then, are a way to be thankful even if we

may not have something. And complaints are a way of recognizing that the world is not as it could be, nor as God promised it should be.

Honesty in prayer is vital. One way Gordon believes honesty can be more easily achieved is with an assembly (the Jewish *kahal,* and the Christian *ecclesia*). In standing beside someone who is not a family member, someone who is outside our inner circle, we are forced to listen to the other more clearly. "Communal ritual has fallen on hard times," Gordon said. When he attends church, he occasionally feels as though it is "religion lite." For him, this means the prayer experience does not complete the full range of emotion, making it shallow. He wants to feel that what he is praying matters. He does not want the sorrow and joy to feel muted, nor does he want one to outweigh the other so much that the congregation would pretend there is no sorrow or there is no reason to express thanksgiving. Prayer can be vigorous and lively, full of joy and singing, and also honest about the blessings and challenges of contemporary life. In listening to each other, we can have a fuller understanding of it all. Communal prayer also includes particular times for what Gordon calls "high prayer," such as holidays or religious seasons, which are often moments to see the world in a larger perspective.

Gordon considers himself to be a traditionalist when it comes to liturgy. The tradition contains honesty, as he put it. He sees this especially clearly at the dining-room table. He appreciates that Christian liturgy includes thanksgiving at the table because he sees it as paired with hospitality. He wants everyone to be welcome. Praying at the table is also connected to time: he gives thanks at the start of each day and lets the day go at its end. Additionally, he and his wife sing a hymn after breakfast and then pray for everyone they have met over the course of the day during their end-of-day prayers. As the physical location for much of his praying, the

table is of course quite important, but it also represents the import of a prayer routine and personal tradition.

While Gordon does appreciate classic texts very much, he also values some change: the evolution of metaphors used for God and better translations of key prayers and texts have kept prayer alive. Gordon recently decided that the christological focus was not so apt anymore and he started changing his language to Holy One or Holy Three. There is a new intersessional prayer crafted for every Sunday service. Crafting a prayer that is not a political statement is particularly challenging, but it is, of course, important to tell the truth about the current situation of each person, the country, and the world. New prayers use better metaphors. Evoking biblical characters, stories, and images shifts the language. For example, using Rock or Salvation instead of God is not the usual doctrinal language. Classic Lutheran texts are often sung but new translations are attentive to these kinds of changes in language. The unfolding and evolving of traditional liturgy, Gordon said, calls us into the beauty of the prayers for both sorrow and joy that together can walk with all of us through life.

Gordon is not sure if prayer makes a difference in the sense of influencing God to respond favorably, but "it makes a difference to me. I am not sure if God exists, but I still pray because it's an act of hope and it broadens what I see in the world." Theology and liturgy need to be consistent, but just as life is full of paradoxes, just as prayer is full of praise and lament, good theology should have some tension, as well. This kind of prayer starts with traditional liturgy, but it can move in any number of directions – just as long as it is bittersweet.

Kimberly Salico-Diehl

When Kimberly Salico-Diehl and I logged onto zoom, she was in her car. She had lost power in her house the day before due to weather and had not yet made it to her office. "I would talk to too many people if I was there anyway," she said. I was not surprised given the ease with which we started our conversation. Kimberly is a pastor in the American Baptist Church, a musician, and a chaplain at the local police department in Colorado. Her various professional and personal experiences have led her to understand the importance of prayer to her life and religious practices, and also the fact that prayer can take on many forms.

Kimberly primarily believes that prayer is about our relationship with God, but it is also about our relationship to ourselves. She has two theories that make prayer complicated, but also form the basis for her own prayer practice. The first is a question: "What if there is no God?" And the second: "Who do I think I am that I can know God?" She continued, "If there is a God, God knows me. But knowing is a human word. Whatever there is to know/experience/desire/want, God can do it." Kimberly believes that there is nothing she can hide from God, and prayer helps her talk to God about things that may be a struggle or that make her feel shame. The older she gets, the more she finds herself talking to God throughout the day. Kimberly said, "I don't feel as alone. Talking to God helps me feel the earth underneath me and the length of my spine and the fullness of being alive. I have a lot more gratitude when I'm engaged in that dialogue." Prayer is two-sided for Kimberly; God too has work to do to deepen that connection. Even if she is feeling empty, she tries to sit with that emptiness: "When I sit with it, I usually find a longing. When I follow it, it's that connection to the Other, the Divine. Prayer changes me." Whether or not God is a specific person or thing in our minds, Kimberly feels

tremendous power in the relationship itself. Prayer is the ability to connect with God and with others.

Prayer can also be intellectual: when studying scripture or reading theology, Kimberly describes it as akin to wrestling – it is the wrestling that makes it feel like prayer. "Thinking about what I need to see here, what is missing here…Studying scripture feels like an asking for revelation or for wisdom," she said. It is often a mystical experience for her because she feels that the texts, particularly the more ancient ones, are alive.

Kimberly loves the idea of the trinity because "prayer as communication is enlivened." She believes in it because it is impossible to hold up a stool without three pegs; one needs three for a circle; three are in community together. Godself is in a relationship conversing, constantly talking and connecting with each other. The theologian Jürgen Moltmann had a significant impact on her thinking because he looks at the Trinity from God's perspective. In her words:

> From God's perspective, Jesus was a piece of God. God felt like Godself was needed to do something different, experience a non-God state, and be on Earth and with the people. God said I'm going to feel everything and be vulnerable. And then God experiences actual death and descends into hell, the place where God cannot go. Every place Jesus touches is then holy. Resurrection becomes: "I've experienced death and I'm back," which helps people not be afraid of death…This doesn't have to be a truth in the scientific sense, but it conveys an understanding of God as wanting a personal connection. And why wouldn't God want a connection with all of creation and to be connected to us?

Kimberly often uses humor and sarcasm, especially when she is praying. She thinks that God can be a little sarcastic too, as in Genesis 18:12-15, where Sarah tries to pretend that she

didn't laugh. Kimberly imagines God's response to Sarah to be a sarcastic "Really?! I saw you laughing!" If God was a person, she thinks God would be sarcastic out of great love and affection. This perspective comes, at least in part, from Kimberly's time in Alcoholics Anonymous and being sober since she was sixteen. Kimberly's prayer practice is linked to her sobriety. People often ask, "How is that working for you?" They mean the question when they ask it, but it can also be asked a little sarcastically and with humor, a spiritual practice that can help to bring out the truth. When she was first getting sober, she heard from others, "Pray to God to be sober during the day, and then thank God at night." She asked what if there is no God, and someone whom she knew to be an atheist responded, "Just pray anyway." She wondered aloud to me if the best or most meaningful prayer she could pray is "one I'm miserable praying. For some reason, I stay and keep praying."

Kimberly believes that presence is its own form of connection and prayer. During her time working as a chaplain in a behavioral health unit at a hospital, people always wanted to talk to her; she was not afraid of how they might challenge her. She even told me about her "favorite Jesus," meaning a patient who told the medical doctors to leave so she could talk to Kimberly. The connection they had was deep because Kimberly was able to provide her with supportive and unquestioning space. She of course did not really believe this woman was God, but "What if she was?" Kimberly added almost as an afterthought. In her time providing spiritual care for police officers, she tries to provide that same presence, even when she sometimes feels torn about her work because of political, religious, or cultural differences. Even with all of these differences and different conceptions of God, the relationship itself provides opportunity for prayer: "As a chaplain," Kimberly told me, "I do nothing besides listen and reflect, but people change from that."

Communal prayer is particularly important to Kimberly. She loves music and even though she is a Baptist, loves the traditional Latin Mass because of the music. Even though not everyone understands the liturgy because it is in Latin, there is power for Kimberly in everyone around the world doing the same thing and saying the same words in a language that no one is actually speaking. Kimberly explained, "I'm constantly looking for language for God that's special God language. It was all there. It's a sacred language." Having a set liturgy can connect people around the world in prayer and that helps them "get out of the muck," as Kimberly put it. The nostalgia factor is significant.

She believes that prayers of Thanksgiving are important to do in community. When she leads, she collects prayers from the congregation, which she refers to as "Prayers of the People." Often, others hear what people are saying and it turns into a moment of praying for the world and also praying for each other. She ends this piece with, "God of Compassion, hear our prayers." Kimberly also thinks confession should be included in group contexts, though it has mostly been left out of progressive churches. She said, "It really helps soften the shame piece to say we together are confessing; that we have fallen short and hurt other people and ourselves. It sets us up for the ability to change."

Kimberly also shared a number of different experiences of communal prayer that have really stayed with her: When her father, who was a Baptist preacher, had a stroke, her whole family gathered around his bed and prayed. Kimberly said that she was an existentialist at the age of six, and when she told her father she did not see the point of praying, he said, "The point is to build something together." And that was the feeling around his bed when he was dying. They were together.

During seminary, Kimberly was involved with an interfaith youth program. Each faith group brought the other to their houses of worship – which is how she found herself attending a mosque. While there, she went to the restroom and watched the other women washing themselves and praying together. While she does not like gender segregated prayer services, during the service itself, she felt incredibly moved to be "shoulder-to-shoulder" with the other women, prostrating fully, creating an embodied prayer experience. They were all moving in the exact same way. Kimberly had a similar experience at a Holy Roller event. She was caught up in the moment and in the energy of the people. She did not feel in control – in a good way – and felt completely loved: "I was praying and dancing with the Spirit."

Janet Walton

"I've lived a life of prayer," Janet Walton told me as we began speaking. A Catholic Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, Professor Emerita of Worship at Union Theological Seminary, Liturgical Consultant for synagogues, a musician, and a ritualist/liturgist, Janet's wide variety of experiences as a teacher, as a consultant, and as a practitioner with different communities has opened her up to many different kinds of prayer.

To find her place in the world, she studied theology and has interpreted that theology in different ways at different times. Janet grew up a Roman Catholic and understood prayer in a more traditional context of praying to God for a specific thing. When she moved to New York, she became immersed in Protestant worship, which she understood as relating to God directly through scripture, a personalized process that implies there can be no single understanding of God. At one point, Janet did not believe that she needed to pray to God; rather, God would be revealed to her. Janet now believes,

> Holiness is an understanding of God, but not only. Holiness is a relationship, a connection…Worship is about creating a spirit that we are communicating something that is beyond anyone's really knowing. In the space we create among us and in our own lives, we do something that is beyond us, something good, something that stretches our understanding of what we should do. And if you want to name that as God, that's perfectly alright.

At the age of 82, Janet has arrived at a different place in her regular prayer practice than where she used to be: "I don't pray to God or ask something of God. I pray to be in touch with a reality of sacredness and goodness and kindness and justice." Janet often meditates and thinks about what is holy, or what holiness means. She has taken on the meditation practice of sitting and paying attention to her physical being:

> I can feel my body is supporting me. And I just say to myself, 'So what does it mean to be kind?' I try to absorb it through my body and maybe through music or words. I'm trying to get my whole being in a place where I can live a little bit more fully and a little bit more holy and justly. I'm just trying to get in touch with our God-like qualities.

When I asked Janet if those qualities included negative ones, she answered that she thinks about those, as well, if they show her a way to live. She said that God is with us in the struggle and then added, "Anger is just. Anger propels us to action. That's a sacred act – a manifestation of what is holy. We create holiness." Janet then underscored paying attention as the most important part; it is both our gift and our responsibility.

In 1976, Janet started a Women's Liturgy Group, made up of women who identified as Catholics, but who felt like the Roman Catholic Church did not include women's experiences.

They were frustrated and wanted to include language and stories that would inspire women's participation and rituals. As Janet put it, "When you think your experience is just as important as all of these interpretations over thousands of years, it's confusing at first. It meant taking seriously my own experiences of meaningful reality." Liturgy had to be changed to more honestly engage and reflect women's voices and honor their experiences.

For her forty years at Union, Janet directed its communal worship, working with students, faculty, and other community members, most of them Protestants of various churches. Changing liturgy was a priority in order to make worship feel relevant. She acknowledged that people like structure, but she also felt the need to interrupt students' commitment to feeling wed to what had always been done. Janet believes, "Worship needs to be attentive to not the way it has always been, but not to make it so new that no one can figure out what it is." Starting with a biblical text is one way to make it feel more familiar. She tried to imbue the sense that liturgy is a way of practicing life: "What in that text will help us feel more human?" One example Janet shared with me is from occasions when a group from Union would go to a protest. A faculty member would bless the group as they departed, and if the group was then arrested, "they felt blessed in knowing that what they were doing was holy and more than we could name." Janet believes that beauty, like justice, is another expression of God. The intertwining of the two creates even greater meaning for her. She continually encouraged students to not just do "prayer business as usual."

In all of her teaching and consulting, Janet tries to keep the following question in mind: How can we create an expression of God that encourages people to be courageous, daring, and loving? When someone asks her to pray for them as they enter a medical procedure, Janet does so, not because she believes that her prayers will help with the physical healing, but because her

prayers help the person feel her support and care. For Janet, God is inherently present in the ways we meet each other and expect something of each other. According to Janet, every person has some part of God, and occasionally we touch it and are changed. "I can see God's expression of goodness and holiness in many people," Janet said. "I can touch it. When people are courageous and daring for a good thing, it's there." Those who lead worship and prayer need to help each member of the community find the goodness in one another – and sacredness among them. We are all yearning to understand what is holy and good. Recently, Janet's seven-year-old neighbor knocked on her door and said, "We need to practice kindness now!" That was a moment of holiness.

Elana Arian

I have known singer-songwriter Elana Arian for many years, but we had never sat down, just the two of us, to talk, let alone discuss her thoughts on prayer. Soon into our conversation, I realized that she was the first Jewish person I was interviewing for this project. Talking about God felt more complicated than in earlier conversations. Progressive Jews do not often talk about faith or belief, about prayer or talking to God or waiting for an answer from God. Our images of God change from person to person and even moment to moment. That is not to say that Christians do not have varied understandings of the Divine, but it seemed to me that it was clearer in my earlier conversations. Once we were able to move past that, Elana was able to dive into what prayer means for her and the space that it holds.

"Prayer is a space apart from everything," Elana said. "We're being called to reply to everything constantly and people are looking for space and time apart." But prayer is not just sitting and meditating; Elana has recently found a lot of comfort in recognizing that she uses the

same tools and words that her ancestors used. This feeling of being a link in a chain is how she understands God:

> Maybe this thing that I'm doing to try to cope is the same thing that they did when they were dealing with whatever bad thing. All sorts of things can happen during prayer, but we're participating in something that's sustained people for thousands of years. It's magical! We each can take what we need from the same experience.

The depth of that ancestral connection transfers to the feeling of praying in community for Elana: "It's about feeling small – in a good way! – that everyone is connected." As a child, Elana felt most moved by prayer or prayer experiences when she was surrounded by people she loved: her family's *havurah* meeting in a living room, services at camp, and especially her family's shabbat practice. Everyone was home and they did an extended version of the traditional blessings, including music by Debbie Friedman and Craig Taubman. The four members of her family of origin would sit around singing, taking time to ritualize the moment, to be together, and to have that time apart. Elana admitted somewhat wistfully that it is harder to do this for her own children as both she and her wife are what she called "professional Jews." She has prayerful experiences wherever she is, but she is not usually with her family since she often works on Shabbat, making things at home much more chaotic.

Elana spends much of her time touring and going to different Jewish communities, leading worship and giving concerts. As a result, she spends a lot of time leading when she is a guest: "I'm trying to make sense of who's in front of me and their reality." When she is leading in a new space, she quickly has to figure out new costumes and traditions. Elana often leads a big service on Friday nights, followed by a smaller one on Shabbat morning. The Saturday service "is more expansive, but I also really rarely want to go. And then, I always feel so much

better afterward than when I woke up this morning – because prayer 'works.' I know that I'm having a personal prayer experience because…I feel more connected and present."

Music is the way Elana has "come into prayer," to use her wording. Her music has evolved over time as she has learned more about herself as a composer and as someone who prays. Much of the music Elana writes is based on the established liturgical texts, but she takes more freedoms now. "I'm not a clergy person," she says, "[but] I can just sit with the siddur and the commentary to get into it in a way that wasn't just the way I learned when I was singing it as a kid." She believes that as a lay person, though admittedly a very involved and talented one, she has more freedom and can take more liberties with the liturgy. She also takes the context into account almost as much as the words: is she writing this for a prayer in a congregational setting or is it a more personal expression of prayer?

Elana has never had her own personal prayer practice, but she has had many experiences with her work in the last decade or so when she has felt deeply, and with clarity, that a certain moment or experience is indeed prayer. This realization signified a shift for her and required her to broaden her own personal concept of what a prayer practice is or could be. It has happened when she is simply sitting and paying attention, when she is writing music, or when she is teaching. "It's hard to deny that [my work is part of] my own prayer practice," Elana said. "We're in a particularly challenging time to stay connected to that practice - culturally and the time of the world and the pace of life. We're programmed to do the opposite of just sitting. Meditation allows for mind wandering and prayer invites you to get deeper. The uncomfortable feeling has probably always been true."

One area where Elana has felt uncomfortable is when non-traditional words for God are used. But that also continues to shift: "I [now] like the openness and utility of just the idea that

any name is a placeholder for The Name, so I can connect with any aspects that I feel connected to at that moment." Elana also mentioned her Grandma Yvette, who referred to God as Frank; she would say, "Come on, Frank!" or "I don't know what's happening, let's ask Frank." I laughed. Elana added that it feels very human to her that we can call God anything we want, knowing that the names we choose are never actually God's name: "We can all use different words and mean the same thing. But that's part of the mystery. It's so Jewish. I can call God Frank or Creator of All Things or Adonai. I can have my own name for God and you can have your own name. We're those kinds of people." Jews can think whatever they want – or not want – about God, and have a meaningful prayer practice.

Along with Rabbi Les Bronstein, Elana is also currently co-teaching Worship Lab for second-year cantorial and rabbinic students at HUC. Preparing for the class has forced her to think about what she believes, how she prays, and why prayer matters. She has come to realize that she has significant thoughts and feelings about prayer and that she really believes it is important. In considering all of this, she realizes how hard prayer actually is. A rabbinical student in the class recently asked, "What's my role in services beyond announcing the page numbers?" Elana told him,

> If you're going to do one thing, your job is to pray… If all we're doing is actually praying ourselves, it opens the door super-wide to everyone who may feel like they don't know anything, all the way to people who want to do every word. It invites me to sink in and engage a little more when I feel like the leader is praying. It's so easy to be critical of the person leading, but it's hard to actually pray. All of it is an invitation to us to try to go a little deeper. Everything else is

fast and surface. If I can do that even one time in a service I'm leading, I've prayed.

Sonja Pilz

Famed art critic Susanne Langer said, "Art…has no consequence; it gives form to something that is simply there." This quote is how Rabbi Sonja Pilz – a Reform Rabbi and liturgist from Germany, but now an American who leads a synagogue in Montana – started a course on High Holiday Liturgy some years ago. At the time, she said that prayer is quite similar to Langer's description of art; liturgy by itself is not life changing on its own, but it makes us more conscious of what makes up our lives. She then added, "Prayer helps people see and feel multiple things at the same time. And if it is done with integrity and authenticity, then the liturgy and the prayers of those that say them will be true."

So perhaps it should come as no surprise that Sonja thinks, "The instinct to pray is evolutionarily embedded in our brains. Every anthropology book about ritual starts with, 'At the beginning of humanity,' and I think there's something to that." She believes that prayer, understood by her quite broadly to encompass a variety of practices including traditional worship, journaling, meditation, art, and more, is innate. She does not feel that every time she meditates, for example, it is necessarily prayer, but she ultimately describes prayer as connective, and meditation as one way she can achieve that connection. The desire to connect is "what it means to be human."

A connection to God is also part of Sonja's understanding of prayer, though she acknowledges that God can be part of the equation in a number of ways. Traditional Jews, in Sonja's experience, talk to God as though God is in the room, discussing everything from big

decisions to life's banalities. She thinks, however, that most Jews in the United States want to talk to God in this way, but struggle to do so. Though prayer is innate, talking to God in this way is "very hard to learn and is more of instinct." Services provide a container for those who do not automatically talk to God all day long or may not even believe in God: "Even for people for whom God is not a partner or character in their lives, we allow people to belong and to experience a sense of God. If you're lucky, something will be said that makes you realize something in yourself that is important." People want to feel meaning and holiness in their lives, even if they do not believe in a God who literally accompanies them.

Sonja acknowledges that many Reform Jews find services boring or infantilizing, and yet, many people continue to attend. As a result, she tries to craft services that can appeal to those that come explicitly to pray and those that may want an idea or a feeling. She considers it the job of the prayer leader to think about what she wants her *kahal* to feel; she most often wants her people to feel that instinct to connect to being more human. On Friday nights, before welcoming the Shabbat bride and singing *Lecha Dodi*, she invites her congregation to pause and contemplate which face of God is entering the room this week. This invitation can make God feel more personal, while creating a sense that each person can get what they need out of services.

Sonja's work as a poet and liturgist has been a significant part of her own prayer practice. Though she initially wrote poetry as poetry and not as prayer, she has now evolved to writing it with the express purpose of using it in Jewish prayer spaces. When I asked her about the difference between poetry and liturgy, she responded, "There is no difference between poetry and prayer. [Poetry] is deeply rooted in my definition of prayer. Art and spirituality tap into the same gifts or voids in people." Sonja is now also a member of The Bayit, a liturgical writing group

started by Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt. The first publication was compiled at the height of the Covid pandemic for *Tisha B'Av* 2020. At the time, it was "a lifeline to be creative and reflective, and to find words that were so desperately needed." Most recently, the group put together a collection for Passover. In considering what she wrote for it, Sonja told me, "It was ten times more depressing than what I had been feeling, but it was awful and had to come out. I trust that what I'm saying will reach someone who needs to hear it. These will be the words that someone needs." Though she of course considers her writing meaningful, at least in part for herself, Sonja said that she rarely writes and then feels, "This is MY prayer." Her poetry often looks at a topic from a different perspective, or it expresses a stronger feeling than she had previously acknowledged on a topic. She described this experience as, "A strange travelling part of me that's detached from my body that does something for other people. What I write is often deeply surprising to me."

Sonja often uses the traditional blessing formula to set up an act of creative theology. Ending a poem with "Baruch Atah Adonai…" does not automatically make it a prayer, according to Sonja, but it does provide her with the opportunity to question what else could be the face of God. She likes the standard formula, and then she makes the participle personal to her. Is God a healer, a parent, or a redeemer today? Using the traditional language also gives the illusion that the prayer is older, connecting us to a greater tradition. Sonja has found that changing the formula to the feminine has been alienating. That being said, she thinks it is quite hard, if not impossible, to make a mistake in prayer because it is ultimately about how people experience holiness. "We need to listen to the entire choir of praying people to understand how people glimpse God," Sonja said. Prayer is a personal expression of how people recognize truth and

meaning in their lives, and as Sonja wrote in The Bayit's supplement of the Amidah, "Holy is the sensing that there is more to this world…Holy is being again with You."

Chapter 3: A Personal Conclusion

I undertook this thesis in an effort to formulate my own view of prayer with the kind of greater sophistication that comes from listening carefully to the wisdom of others. Part One summarized a variety of current views on what Jewish tradition has to say, and much of that was already familiar to me. Although my survey was hardly comprehensive, it did provide the usual synopses of tradition that are available, and also at least some of the ways that even modern Jewish thinkers handle matters of prayer and of a God who hears prayer.

Part Two supplemented the normative Jewish views of Part One, by interviewing a variety of current experts in the subject – experts being some established thinkers and liturgists in the field and a composer of new sacred song. Most important, my interviewees included Christian liturgists of note, an attempt to escape the bubble of my Reform-Jewish and HUC community. Because of time constraints, the number of interviews was limited. I do not claim to have spoken to everyone with views that matter. I wanted only to experiment with what might be a beginning of a larger study; to see what an expanded purview might turn up; and to see how that larger purview might inform the view of prayer that I am in the process of formulating for myself.

What follows in this concluding section of the thesis are some thoughts on what my own view is coming to look like, as I integrate what I heard from others into the conception of prayer with which I entered this work. What follows are some of my most significant learnings and takeaways: the importance of talking about prayer; wrestling with doubt and belief; using metaphor and art to take risks and create something new. And finally, I close with my own definition of prayer, and what makes it meaningful.

Let's Talk About Prayer

Simply talking about prayer felt new and different. Conversations were full of depth and meaning. This might be surprising given that I am at the end of Rabbinical School; how could that be possible? The fact is, however, that in our HUC classes, we do not often discuss prayer and why it is meaningful. As I mentioned at the very beginning of the thesis, I am able to talk about liturgy and the evolution of prayers. But talking about prayer is different.

It was, therefore, a new experience to spend concerted time on just that topic: prayer; and to do so (by and large) with people whose work in the world obliges them to think matters through in great detail. Each conversation was so deep that it felt as if I was understanding the essence of who each person truly is, even though I often did not have a preexisting relationship with them. Openness was key and a true gift. The hour I spent with each person I interviewed was holy.

A failure at HUC to address prayer more regularly is therefore more than just a hole in the curriculum; it is an absence of holiness. We would do well to get comfortable asking our peers and congregants what they find most meaningful about prayer, creating another entry point for us to develop deeper dialogue with one another, and for each of us to relate more deeply to worship. This should happen often. Given that this is a topic that is (ideally) always changing and evolving, we should not consider our views on prayer to be stagnant, and so, revisiting the topic feels vital to me. We need to show our own desire and willingness to have these conversations. And in talking about prayer, I hope we can also become more comfortable with praying itself.

The importance of deepening our ongoing engagement with prayer came home to me this year when our Tisch Fellowship student group visited Grace Chapel, a megachurch in the Boston

suburbs. I was struck by how seamlessly prayer is infused into every part of church life there – even business meetings, for example. This kind of prayer is generally spontaneous and is not necessarily offered by a clergyperson. Everyone who is part of the community learns how to pray like this, because the very act of praying is deeply embedded into church culture. In addition, unlike the Lutheran worship described by Gordon and Gail, Grace's worship services do not have a set liturgy. Except for a few traditional prayers (The Lord's Prayer, for example), all of the language used is spontaneous. Services are structured around themes: moments of prayer about adoration of God, contrition and asking for forgiveness of sins, offerings of thanksgiving, and supplications for help or mercy. The pastors intentionally avoid overtly religious language, instead focusing on accessibility and authenticity. Prayer at Grace is explicitly seen as an opportunity for a conversation with God. And to help with that conversation, to make it as accessible as possible, there is even a small chapel filled with trained volunteers who can help people leaving services pray privately. Prayers take on a variety of forms within this community – public and private, part of larger worship services, meetings, and classes – each of them a moment of connection and conversation. Prayer is simply woven into the fabric of what they do.

But even Gordon and Gail, who have a fixed and well-defined order of communal worship – even they engage regularly in spontaneous prayer: around their table, for example; and before going to bed. It is not just in megachurches without formal liturgies (like Grace) where we find greater comfort with praying. Prayer seems more intrinsically interwoven in Christian practice generally.

Could we Reform Jews approach prayer in a similar way, not simply relegating prayers to services, but using prayer as a tool, as an opportunity to turn any moment into one of holiness

and connection? Simply asking the question, "What is prayer to you?" has the ability to open a conversation, to transform an experience.

Wrestling with Faith

We often discuss faith as something one does or does not have. And yet, here were experts who were showing me that the opposite was actually much more meaningful; questioning faith itself contained so much depth. Vocalizing doubt, Gail Ramshaw suggested, could lead us to a more honest relationship with our faith. Doubt continued to play a significant role in every conversation. These modern liturgists – dare I say, artists – did not shy away from admitting that they themselves are not sure about God. Their struggle over faith often led to deeper engagement with that faith, and a desire to figure out what to think and believe: Which moments contain the most meaning? With which people do I want to pray, and when and how? What do I need to express today? Doubt changes the tone of the conversation on prayer and praying. Instead of focusing only on "Does God exist?" or "Does God hear prayers?" it encompasses bigger questions about how to create deeper and more meaningful connections – to ourselves, and our community, and yes, occasionally to God. What if Jewish clergy regularly reflected their own doubts from the bimah – but also, the larger questions of why we pray as well?

Discussing prayer without discussing God is nearly impossible, and many Reform Jews get stuck on the concept of God. We are often uncomfortable saying we believe in God because saying that can can feel incompatible with science, modernity, or intellectual honesty. We also do not talk about doubt, though. We simply say whether we do or do not believe in God. But research shows that Reform Jews experience God or holiness all the time – even if they call it

something else. The most recent Pew Report on Jewish practice and identity supports this theory: while only 18% of Reform Jews believe in "God of the Bible," 59% believe in a "higher power/spiritual force."[23] Traditional Judaism simply assumes God's existence, but modern Jewish thought has increasingly moved away from viewing God as omnipotent and all-knowing. Whereas God used to be the center of the proverbial universe, we have become much more human centered in modernity, and God is not tangible the way most things in our life are. As Gail Ramshaw pointed out, the familiar image of God as a Zeus-like figure – an old man on a throne – is the easiest to picture, but the hardest to believe. So we question: Does God exist? I would like to suggest that is the wrong question.

A better question might be, "Is there a moment in your life that you would describe as having been in the presence of God?" Larry Hoffman told me that a friend of his, a priest from the University of Notre Dame, would gather people after Sunday services and ask this very question. Inspired, Larry started to ask the question of his students at HUC-JIR, and he encouraged them to ask it at their student pulpits. The students often came back to him, saying that this question was too difficult; Reform Jews struggled with defining or even naming God. So Larry reframed the question: "Is there a moment in your life that you would describe as being in the presence of God, or one that was spiritual or profound?" That question opened doors. Even the most skeptical Jews could answer. And the instances they named as "spiritual" or "profound" were the same sort of thing that Catholics named as God's presence. As human beings, we all experience similar realities; where we differ is our comfort zones in naming them.

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[23] "Overwhelming majority of Orthodox believe in God of the Bible; most Conservative and Reform do not," Pew Research, last modified 4 May 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/pf_05-11-21_jewish-americans-02-8-png/.

Just as discussing the concept of prayer could change our relationship with prayer itself, so too could discussing our life experiences as instances of God and spirituality.

Belief may be elusive, but experience is real. Doubt thus propels us to deeper engagement. Even those who deny the existence of God may concede that holiness and meaning are real; and they too are matters of faith. As clergy, we can help nurture this kind of connection; we can balance faith and doubt by understanding it as a form of God-wrestling. In Genesis, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure, *Ish*, until dawn. After Jacob wins, the figure says to him, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven (*sarita* - a play on *Yisrael*) with beings divine and human…."[24] With this example in mind, wrestling with belief is not a flaw – it is our heritage as *Bnei Yisrael*.

Prayer is one area where we name that struggle out loud. We can include doubts and belief, moving into a place of expanse: a relationship with ourselves and our community where spirituality and connection are not just possible, but probable. Like any relationship, it requires work. But what is prayer if not *Avodah* – holy labor?

Creating Anew

I imagine I am not alone, when I say that I have had countless experiences when I should have felt something meaningful, but sadly did not. I have sat in services feeling disconnected, bored, or uninspired, wondering if others could tell that I was merely watching, not praying. I still held the siddur, said the words, bowed at the right times – but I felt as if I had lost the connection, as though I was typing at a computer that was not turned on. What is the difference between the moments of prayer I described previously, those of great meaning and connection,

[24] Genesis 23:29.

and these other times where I looked like I was praying, but I did not *feel* like I was praying? Why do some moments feel sacred and others do not?

Let's be honest: services can feel rote or mechanical. If I am not open to feeling connected to my community or God, or distracted by the many other things to do, prayer becomes just another task on a to-do list. Sonja Pilz concurred: she too is all too aware that many people find services boring. Yet Kimberly Salico-Diehl may be onto something when she suggests that precisely the prayers we least want to say may be the ones we need most. The resistance we feel toward certain words or ideas might actually be pointing us to something unresolved or deeply important. Daily blessings – like those that praise God for renewing us each day – gently invite us to imagine how we might recreate ourselves and the world around us. And perhaps we need not limit ourselves to the instances found formally in our order of service; perhaps we can develop the practice of inventing our own blessings for things that strike us as important during the day. Prayer can push us.

Throughout the conversations I had, I was reminded of the importance of such pushing and taking risks. Janet Walton exemplified this most of all, by directly asking, "How can we create an expression of God that encourages people to be courageous, daring, and loving?" Prayer can encourage us to be bolder and braver in the rest of our lives. I am reminded of Gordon Lathrop's comment of what he called "religion lite." Oftentimes, church services feel (to him) as though they do not encompass the full range of human emotions. We can have moments in communal prayer that do exactly what Janet asked, encourage people to be courageous, daring, and loving. We also must be courageous, daring, and loving when we pray.

Just as we cannot expect someone to pick up a paint brush and paint like Picasso, we should not expect individuals to be able to instinctively open their mouths and know how to be

daring, how to be courageous, how to be loving in their prayers. As leaders, we must guide with clarity and intention. Our job is "To pray" knowing that even "if all we're doing is actually praying ourselves, it opens the door super-wide to everyone," as Elana Arian put it. And as worshipers, we must stay open to being moved. We may, of course, somehow find our own words to express a prayer that feels right; but not always, and the siddur offers us words when our own fail, when we struggle to summon the right words, when we do not know how or what to ask.

Keva, the structure of prayer, can thus draw us in and guide us when *kavannah*, intention, feels distant or out of reach. On days I feel closed or distracted, the rhythm, the music, the poetry, offer a path back. If I let the words and melodies carry me, push me, I can often find my way to a place of prayer. Even when not every single word resonates, I can still participate and find meaning; I can think, sing, reflect, and feel. Prayer is meaningful not because every moment is electrifying but rather because the practice, the ritual, the openness to being pushed, can transform the moment. In this way, prayer becomes a bold practice, an artistic one, in fact, because like any artistic practice, expertise develops only over time.

There is a moral component here as well. The very *keva*, the fixity of prayer, asks us to bend our own individuality to the larger will of the group: those present around us, and also Jews through time who bequeathed this particular set of words and practices to us. By extension, and in keeping with the prayer texts we have inherited, we are asked to change ourselves, our communities, and the world. But the artistry of kavanah, the use of new liturgy, metaphors, poetry and music, do not dilute this moral component. On the contrary, they enhance it. By being responsive not only to history but also to the moment in which we find ourselves, the

artistry of kavanah responds to specific challenges and points to new avenues to access and discover.

What is Prayer?

Poet Mary Oliver captures one image of prayer beautifully: "Just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak." Her advice resonates deeply with me. A few minutes of prayer – of connection, breathing, singing – can shift something inside of us. Praying is something I feel quite comfortable doing.

But it is much harder to articulate precisely why prayer matters, or how it fits into a modern life. This thesis was an attempt at arriving at some answers, though of course not all. It would be impossible to uncover every way to make prayer matter because it is different for each person; and then it also is likely to change for each person every day or even every hour.

Here is what I do know: occasionally prayer "works." Now, I have the same pressures of work and home that everyone does. But every so often, something shifts: we want to walk through the door and pray, the mood is right, the kids are calm during Shabbat candle lighting, no one is rushing. At synagogue services, maybe the musicians strike a chord that perfectly matches the room's energy; everyone joins in just as they should – maybe not with perfect pitch, but with great intentionality; the rabbi offers just the words that I need to hear. Sometimes that rabbi is even myself. In those moments, prayer becomes something larger – something transcendent that connects me to the ineffable.

So, after all this, can I answer the question: what makes prayer meaningful? There is no single definition. But I find comfort with many of them. Prayer gives us an opportunity to be

moved. It links our small story to a larger one and reveals the holiness within us and around us. Prayer is also a space to integrate our inner and outer life. Prayer highlights the values most essential to being human. Prayer is time outside of time but can happen anytime, anywhere. Prayer can be beautiful, loving, and comforting. And prayer can also be challenging, sad, and even painful. As Gordon Lathrop said, "All prayer is praise *and* lament." Prayer can hold it all, the fullness of life, the entire spectrum of our emotions and values, and each and every experience. Prayer is a space to be present, to reflect on the past, to dream of the future. Prayer lets us explore, remember commitments, repair what is fractured. Prayer is an opportunity to seek guidance, to ask for what we most deeply desire, to express gratitude, to simply feel awe. Ultimately, prayer is a conversation that connects us – to ourselves, to our community, and to God – more deeply. With all of that, why wouldn't I want to pray?

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