Spontaneous Jewish Prayer: A Historical Trajectory and Implications for Today

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Digest

From the days of the Bible our ancestors spontaneously prayed to God, and Jews have never stopped doing so. Jews often use similar language and structure in their private prayers whether consciously or unconsciously, because the fixed liturgy has become engrained in our hearts and our minds. Jews today do not have many forums for discussing spontaneous prayer, and they often feel that unscripted prayer to God is somehow outside the realm of Jewish religious life. There is little opportunity for this kind of prayer to be spoken aloud in synagogue, while there are hundreds of already-formulated blessings to be said throughout the day, leaving Jews to feel perhaps that there is no need and no room to formulate one's own prayers.

The Rabbis of the Talmud composed heartfelt prayers to God based on liturgical themes and to accompany biblical verses that were becoming the structured prayer service. Their spontaneous words are our fixed liturgy today. However, they created room within the traditional, structured prayer service for personal reflection and to acknowledge moments for the individual amidst the community.

This thesis comments broadly on Jewish private and spontaneous prayer from the days of the Bible, through rabbinic times, medieval liturgical changes, mysticism and Hasidism, and Yiddish women's prayers. As well, it investigates this kind of prayer as it is being written today by feminists and pastoral care providers. A major thread that is woven throughout this thesis is the notion that *kavanah* is the major way to bring spontaneity to Jewish liturgy. Comments are made at the end of the thesis about the role of spontaneous prayer for Jews today.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This thesis investigates broadly the ways in which spontaneous prayer has functioned in the history of Judaism and makes comments and suggestions about its use today. By examining specific prayers that were composed spontaneously, we learn how this kind of prayer has been constructed over time and how it is being formulated today. This kind of analysis not only sheds light onto general rubrics of Jewish liturgy, but also suggests structure, language and imagery that seem to be important for inclusion in the construction of new and spontaneous prayers. This thesis begins by looking at pre-modern materials (Tanakh, classical rabbinic and medieval sources) before moving into contemporary issues.

My interest in this topic grew in particular out of two situations in which I found myself as a rabbinical student.

After returning from my first year of rabbinical studies at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, I had been assigned my first student pulpit in Texarkana, Texas. I was to fly to this small town each month, where there are about forty Jewish families, to be their "Rabbi." After surviving my first High Holidays as the rabbi, cantor, educator and pastor, all rolled into one, I felt growing confidence that not only would this "job" be fulfilling, but that I would learn a tremendous amount, and actually touch people's lives in a positive way.

On my second or third visit to Texarkana, I received a call from the prison chaplain. He told me that there was a Jewish inmate who would like to visit with the rabbi. In about a five-minute span, a million images passed before my eyes. Every prison scene that I had watched on TV and in the movies flashed before me. What would

this be like? What would I be able to offer this prisoner? What did he need and want? Would I be safe in there?

One of my congregants drove me to the prison and waited in his car for me outside. I checked in as the "rabbi." I handed over my license, had my bag searched, and had any sharp objects confiscated during the time I was visiting. A guard met me and we walked down the hallway. There was noise, fighting, music and yelling. It was surreal. I was escorted to a small visiting room where a thin, unassuming man was sitting. The door shut. The guard waited outside. The man I sat opposite was covered in black and blue marks. He thanked me for coming and began to cry. He told me about his regret for the decisions he had made. He told me of his guilt for the pain he had caused his family. He wanted to be forgiven by God. We spoke of *teshuvah*. I mostly listened. I gave him a copy of *Pirke Avot* and a prayerbook. As his talking died down, he asked if we could pray. Pray? "I'm a Jew, do we do that?" I thought. How? Which prayer? I started to sweat. Had I ever heard a rabbi just pray? No. I started flipping through my new, hardly used Rabbi's Manual. Then, I just took his hand, bowed my head and made up a prayer to God that this man should be safe and find inner peace. It felt awkward, foreign, embarrassing, intimate, and "unauthentic." I stumbled with my words. I didn't know if I should use Hebrew. And then I left.

Fast forward a year. I had just finished my third year at HUC. I was signed up to be a student chaplain in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Program, which is a requirement of the rabbinical school curriculum. I was part of a group of four other students, including a middle-aged Catholic nun from Tanzania. It seemed that her whole family died one by one of AIDS over the course of the summer. When her mother finally

died, she returned to Africa several weeks before our program ended. There was a middle-aged woman who was a former actress studying to be an Episcopal priest. There was a young man in an evangelical Christian ministry program. And there was a young Presbyterian woman getting a degree in Theology, unsure of what she believed or wanted to do with her degree. Our supervisor was an ordained minister from a small Christian sect called the Church of the Brethren. I later found out that he is a Jew, whose parents are both Jewish. His parents raised him as a Christian to avoid the antisemitism they had encountered in Hungary.

I was the only practicing Jew in our group, and one of few Jewish students who had done CPE with this supervisor. There was an Orthodox rabbi on the staff of Evanston Northwestern Hospital who took little interest in my development as a woman Reform rabbi (although I think he tried in his own way to be helpful).

The model we were presented with was to actively listen and be present with our patients (of all religions). We were to offer a prayer or a spiritual response based on the feelings that had been expressed by the patient during our visit. We shared verbatim accounts of the visits we had had in order to learn from each other about how to be better chaplains. Again, I was confronted with many of the questions that arose in that prison for me: Could I pray *for* someone else? How did I feel about being perceived as being closer to God? Why was I praying? Why did it feel so embarrassing and strange to pray aloud with someone else? How could I make it Jewish? How could I reconcile my mind and my heart? My mind tells me that I have no idea whether God hears our prayers and even less knowledge about how God addresses them. My heart wants God to hear my prayers and respond.

Over the course of the summer, these questions just multiplied. I struggled to find my authentic prayer-voice. I told myself that my *visits* were my prayers with my patients. I wondered why, by and large, Christian patients prayed spontaneously and aloud with ease and why Jewish patients were so reticent to pray, or even to speak about prayer or God.

These experiences with Jewish chaplaincy prompted me to want to investigate the historical Jewish attitudes toward spontaneous prayer. As well, I was interested to speak to rabbis and chaplains who are known for being spiritual guides for Jews.

My definition of spontaneous Jewish prayer is what Jews say aloud or to themselves, or write down on the spot using their own personal and creative words to thank, praise, or petition God, or to mark and sanctify a moment. Spontaneous prayer can also be accomplished when reading another's words if the words are infused with *kavannah.*

Spontaneous prayer in fact is an essential part of Jewish liturgical history. While its role in liturgy has changed in structure and scope, there is still room for spontaneous prayer within the structured communal liturgy. Of course outside of synagogue, Jews of all ages across all the movements with varying degrees of formal or informal Jewish education spontaneously pray.

Suggestions will be made as to appropriate uses and structures for this kind of prayer today. Grounding these suggestions within Jewish liturgical history will be crucial to allowing spontaneous prayer to be employed with confidence and knowledge. Jews should continually seek to move beyond *keva* into a particularly individual and/or distinctive realm of prayer. Utilizing spontaneous Jewish prayer, which although based

on structured prayer is still nonetheless fluid and dynamic, has the potential to add meaning, richness, and purpose to one's relationship with God, to one's understanding of self, and for members of a community engaged in prayer.

Chapter 1: Spontaneous Prayer in the Bible

I. Introduction

We begin our historical survey of spontaneous Jewish prayer with the Bible because in so many ways it is the basis and core of Jewish theology and prayer. However, several challenges and questions arise when looking in the Bible for early examples of "Jewish spontaneous prayer." What do we mean by spontaneous prayer in the Bible? How can we describe this kind of prayer? As we will see, it will not be correct to define spontaneous prayer as "non-formulaic prayer." Spontaneous prayer follows structural rubrics and speech patterns. What we can say about spontaneous prayer is that it is personal, specific, and arises from a particular situation in life. It may be uttered silently or aloud. It may be said by and for the pray-er or on behalf of another person. It is directed to God. It is said as an expression of thanksgiving, in lament, and for help. In the Bible it is often portrayed as directly efficacious. God hears and acts.

Written or fixed prayers and incantations meant for ritualistic occasions, although they can be imbued with a spontaneous quality, are not at their core examples of spontaneous prayer. With this said, "spontaneous" need not refer to prayer that is said aloud or silently only once, never to be uttered or thought again. When a pray-er recites a prayer written by another, his or her prayer can still be spontaneous in that the emotion or *kavana* can be personal and specific and the pray-er can appropriate the prayer for his or her own unique situation in life. Psalms can function like this. There is fluidity between spontaneous and fixed prayer.

> Prayers originally result from a spontaneous religious experience, an outpouring of religious feeling and inspiration. Frequently words of spontaneous prayer, spoken by men of deep spirituality and gifted expression, are recorded or

> remembered. Such expressions, flowing from religious inspiration and emotion of a particular moment, often achieve a life beyond that particular moment itself. Since the ability to articulate the feelings of the heart in words of poetic beauty is a rare gift, men of lesser gifts of expression will appropriate such words of beauty and feeling for placing their own intense religious feelings into words of prayer.[1]

Rabbi Barton Lee, in his rabbinical thesis on the private prayers of the Rabbis of the Talmud, reiterates the point that even written prayers with fixed wording developed from a spontaneous desire to connect to God. Remembering this aspect of prayer is crucial. It is precisely the way prayer develops from the heart to the mind to the hand that gives it the indelible mark of spontaneity of the human soul which imbues it with a timeless quality.

The following are important criteria to consider when discussing biblical spontaneous prayer. The setting: This includes the place, context, and reason for the prayer. As we will see, spontaneous prayer occurs anywhere at anytime. In fact, if a prayer is offered in a non-cultic site it is often an indicator that it is spontaneous. This is not to say though that prayer connected to ritual and sacrifice cannot also be personal and specific and imbued with a highly spontaneous quality. The language: Spontaneous prayer often uses personal images of God in which the pray-er speaks to God as he or she would to a fellow person.[2]

This chapter will begin by explaining what we mean by spontaneous prayer in the Bible. We will address the difficult question of whether this kind of prayer reflects the personal theology of the writer of the text. In other words, is this prayer descriptive of ancient prayer life or prescriptive? Next, we will examine the language used in this kind

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[1] Barton Lee, "The Private Prayers of the Rabbis" (rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati, 1970), 1.

[2] By saying that a marker of spontaneous prayer is the use of personal images of God is not to say that this language is not also found in more formulaic, scripted prayer. It is to say that biblical spontaneous prayer provides later generations with a myriad of ways to relate to God which no doubt have been incorporated into individual prayers ever since.

of prayer. The first problem to discuss will be those prayers for which we have only context but no words. Comments will be made about the many verbs used as openers for this kind of prayer. Thirdly, we will focus on the fluidity between fixed and unfixed prayers. Lastly, this chapter will address the different genres of spontaneous prayer including petitionary prayer, prayers of thanks, and the blessing formula.

What Do We Mean by Spontaneous Prayer in the Bible?

Most of the biblical characters are literary creations, and their personas as well as their words come from the hands of writers and redactors. Even concerning those figures who may have been historical, there is little evidence that the biblical writers recorded verbatim the prayers spoken aloud by them. When it comes to prophets, the issue is exacerbated because much of prophecy is presented as coming directly from God through the mouth of the intermediary. It is in the Book of Jeremiah that we have the scenario of Baruch, a scribe, writing down the words spoken aloud by Jeremiah. The biblical writers want us to believe that Jeremiah's words were not carefully and painstakingly worked out by a poet conscious of meter and rhyme, but came from God through his open mouth.[3] Indeed, the biblical writers present certain prayers as though they had been spoken from the heart, aloud and spontaneously.

Investigating why the writers present prayer in this form will help us understand the nature and role of spontaneous prayer. Thus, when we speak of biblical spontaneous prayer, we mean to comment on those prayers which are *presented* as if they had been spoken spontaneously by the pray-er.

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[3] Jeremiah 36:17-18

Moshe Greenberg's work *Biblical Prose,* which is the edited transcript of a series of lectures given at the University of California at Berkeley during the fall and winter of 1981-1982, constitutes the main study of the embedded prayers of the Bible. He writes that "the most prominent forms of worship and prayer in the Bible seem to leave little room for free, simple, spontaneous expression."[4] Despite the paucity of what he calls "spontaneous expression," Greenberg devotes significant attention to it.

II. Is Spontaneous Prayer in the Bible Descriptive?

It seems that from biblical days until now, humans in particular situations are compelled to call out to God. What do these outpourings reveal? It is possible that one may intellectually believe one thing about God, yet emotionally feel another way about God. Thus, one's outpourings may tell us more about what the person is experiencing than about theology. In the case of the Bible, prayers may or may not reflect the theological beliefs of the writers authoring the "prayers." Balentine describes the lament along these lines:

> [The lament, for example] is not a construct of thought; it is a living reality. It arises in a cry of pain. It is a cry that has become an utterance... laments are not reflections on suffering. They do not offer thoughtful meditations on the problem of suffering. Rather, they express the reality of suffering. In this sense, lament expresses what one actually feels in the throes of suffering, not what tradition or the canons of orthodoxy propose that one ought to say.[5]

Balentine suggests that like today, the ancients, although living in a highly religious society, also expressed raw emotions in prayers whose sentiments may or may not be accurate reflections of their theological understandings.

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[4] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1983), 4.
[5] Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 1993), 150.

In addition, such outpourings may tell us as much about cultural forms of communication as about specific prayer-language. Biblical spontaneous prayers seem to flow as a conversation might.[6] Conversation may seem like a peculiar word considering that the other party is God. However, in the Bible, God often speaks back, creating an actual exchange of words. While today people do not generally hear the words of God, we still speak to God as we might cry out to a dear friend. Thus, while it is true that we can see patterns in the spontaneous prayers in the Bible, similar patterns are utilized in conversations as well. Beginning with an address, explaining the situation, and asking for help may be rubrics used in private prayers, but they are also rubrics used in human-to-human communication. In both cases, this form may be subconscious and culturally engrained. The spontaneous prayers embedded in the biblical text suggest to us that these patterns are timeless. For thousands of years, people have spoken to God as they would speak to a confidant.

A challenge in analyzing spontaneous prayer is the difficulty of differentiating between crying out to the abyss in desperation or awe, crying out specifically to God, and crying out to a person who may or may not be living or present. For this study, only words spoken specifically to God will be defined as "prayer." As Balentine writes,

> All prayer [in the Bible] is directed to God. In broad terms both the certainty of divine presence and the uncertainty of this presence most often determine the human response to God. These two responses are articulated generally as praise and lament, the one full of confidence, the other of fear.[7]

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[6] Etan Levine writes, "Without exception the ancients meditated with the Divine by means of sacrifice and rite, and not by means of conversation! Whatever words may have been uttered, petitions voiced or paeans recited were all addenda to the sacrificial act itself. It is only in the Hebrew Bible that we discover the evolution of prayer." See "The Development of Biblical Prayer" in *Dor Le Dor* 9, 4 [36] (1981), 172-178.
[7] Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 33.

Balentine goes so far as to say that words not specifically directed to God cannot even be considered "prayer" in the Bible. Or, perhaps he is implying that even when words are spoken in a prayerful way to a person, ultimately they are actually intended for God's ears as well. This nuance that Balentine suggests helps us remember the pervasive religious nature of ancient Israelite society.

Another challenge in discussing biblical spontaneous prayer is that in many instances the prayer is silent. Thus, we can comment on time and place but not on wording.[8] Greenberg writes that praying and prayers are mentioned outside the Psalms about 140 times, and that, in well over half of these cases, only the act of prayer is mentioned without the words of the prayer.[9] For example,

וַיֶּעְתַּר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנֹכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הִוא וַיֵּעָתֶר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתַּהַר רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ׃

Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived (Genesis 25:21).[10]

וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וַתִּשְׁקַע הָאֵשׁ׃

The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down (Numbers 11:2).

וְהָיָה כִּי הִרְבְּתָה לְהִתְפַּלֵּל לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְעֵלִי שֹׁמֵר אֶת־פִּיהָ׃
וְחַנָּה הִיא מְדַבֶּרֶת עַל־לִבָּהּ רַק שְׂפָתֶיהָ נָעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשָּׁמֵעַ וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ עֵלִי לְשִׁכֹּרָה׃

As she kept on praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk (I Samuel 1:12-13).

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[8] Moshe Greenberg provides a list of biblical references to prayers for which we do not have the wording as well as to prayers with words, in his notes 3a and b for lecture 1 in *Biblical Prose Prayer.*
[9] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer,* 7.
[10] Hebrew translations come from the *JPS Hebrew English Tanakh,* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 1999).

Hannah is known for her heartfelt silent prayer to God.[11] This text is a revealing illustration of silent spontaneous expression because we know the context and basis for Hannah's plea. Earlier in the text, we are privy to the beginning of Hannah's petition to God for a son (v. 11). But then in these verses, her prayer continues silently. We can surmise what she is praying from the context, but her actual words are not given.

Each of the above examples show people praying to God in crisis. In the last two examples, the verbal root *peh/lamed/lamed* which specifically means "pray" is utilized. Also, in all three of these cases, the private, spontaneous prayers are efficacious. God hears and responds. In the first two instances, involving Isaac and Moses, the pray-er is praying on behalf of another or others.

III. Prayer-Words in the Bible

There are a variety of verbs used to introduce prayer, and each one has its own nuance. In fact, each word or term associated with prayer in the Bible teaches us about the act of prayer. There are many examples in the Bible of the following prayer-opener, "And so and so *said*...O God..." Patrick D. Miller struggles with the difference, if there is one, between talking to God and praying to God. He concludes, "...Most of those situations in which God is addressed by human beings at their initiative, whatever language is used to describe the act, will be seen by the reader as prayerlike in some form or other...Many of the cases in which someone 'says' something to God are spontaneous, non-cultic, occurring in the immediate situation."[12]

[11] It is cited in the Talmud as the basis for the silent Amidah, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.
[12] Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 1994), 33.

וַיֹּאמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנִי אַבְרָהָם הַקְרֵה־נָא לְפָנַי הַיּוֹם
וַעֲשֵׂה־חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנִי אַבְרָהָם׃

> And [Eliezer] said, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham (Genesis 24:12).

Another common conversation-word that is used when petitioning another for information is "ask." In Hebrew, the root *shin/alef/lamed* connotes asking or inquiring. In Judges 20:18-28, three prayers are introduced by the children of Israel with the phrase, "And they asked counsel...." The questions in these instances are all about going to war with the tribe of Benjamin. Each "prayer" represents a short, simple question. The first "prayer" asks who shall go up first in battle. The second concerns whether there should again be battle with Benjamin. The third asks whether the battle shall cease. To each of these questions God replies that the battle should take place.

> These prayers do not contain an address, though the context indicates that they were addressed to God; nor do they contain any narrative or plea. They merely request an answer of a simple nature concerning their conduct.[13]

What makes these three questions prayers? Kearley looks to the context in which the questions are asked. Because the questions are verbalized at the house of God where the Ark of the Covenant stood and where Phineas worked, the setting seems ritualistic.[14]

Another scene which involves "asking" God also involves a ritualistic component. Here the verbal root is not *sh'al* but *bikesh*.

דִּרְשׁוּ יְהוָה וְעֻזּוֹ בַּקְּשׁוּ פָנָיו תָּמִיד׃

> Turn to the Lord, to His might, *seek* His presence constantly (Psalm 105:4).

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[13] F.F. Kearley, "Biblical Prayers Suggested By the Hebrew Words *Biqqesh, Darash and Sh'al*", *Hebrew Studies*, 17 (1976), 161.
[14] Ibid. 161.

Miller suggests that the use of this verb "seek" signifies a formal act of prayer and reflection.[15] While "seeking" God connotes a broad attempt to connect to the deity, the notion of "asking" God seems to be used in matters of direct questions. Priests "ask" God by casting lots. It was believed that God would provide the answer for the question by the way the lots fell. Most of the usages of this kind of inquiry to God occurred concerning war. This kind of petitioning God came to an end in the early years of the monarchy.[16]

Another term, *darash* was also used in relation to prophets or priests who similarly tried to gain direction from God. Later, this same verb is used for one-to-one communication with God without intermediary.[17] When prophecy and the priesthood came to an end, personal prayer and attention to Scripture were the ways to discern the will of God.[18] Both of these verbs are used in cases that seem more like questioning than prayer. Context, rather than specific verbal cues, is the basis for this distinction, and as we shall see, it is a difficult and fairly subjective line to draw. In the case of personal prayer, the line is even fuzzier because of the similarities between conversation with God and prayer to God.

However, there are terms that *explicitly* refer to prayer such as the verb translated most often as "pray", *hitpallel*. This verb connotes prayer or intercession. Here too though, there is a wide range of meaning associated with this word. "Neither prayer nor intercession does adequate justice to the actual range of *hitpallel*, since the action

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[15] Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 34. Examples of such prayer are 2 Sam. 12:15, 2 Sam. 21:1, Dan. 9:3.
[16] Josh. 9:14, Judges 1:1
[17] Deut. 4:29
[18] Psalm119

involved is not necessarily verbal and the appeal is sometimes expressed in other ways, presumably by gestures."[19]

לִהְיוֹת עֵינְךָ פְתֻחוֹת אֶל־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתָּ יִהְיֶה שְׁמִי שָׁם לִשְׁמֹעַ אֶל־הַתְּפִלָּה אֲשֶׁר יִתְפַּלֵּל
עַבְדְּךָ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה׃

> May Your eyes be open day and night toward this House, toward the place of which You have said, 'My name shall abide there'; may You heed the prayers which Your servant will offer toward this place (I Kings 8:29).

We see how this verb fits well in cases of private prayer which may consist of words, a cry or bodily expression. Speiser points out that this root is linked to the concept of *pilpul*.[20] This connection adds depth to our understanding of biblical petition because it tells us that there was a component of wanting God to consider and calculate the plea. "Inherent in the word, therefore, is the notion of prayer as the placing of a case, a situation, before God for consideration, for God's assessment."[21]

Another word specifically associated with prayer is *atar* meaning "to entreat" or "pray." It always refers to prayer to God, and is not used between people. We have already referenced Genesis 25:21 above as being a prayer with no words. This prayer also makes use of this root. Isaac *yetar* -prayed or entreated God. He made an urgent request of God. This verb is especially used in situations in which one person is praying on behalf of another.

The root *chanan* is another verb that indicates prayer. It bears the connotation of granting favor. In a prayer context, the root refers to seeking divine favor, mercy, and

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[19] E.A. Speiser "The Stem PLL in Hebrew" *JBL*, 82 (1963), 305.
[20] Ibid. 306.
[21] Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 38.

grace. The main instance of this root being used in the Bible in the context of prayer is Deuteronomy 3:23.

וָאֶתְחַנַּן אֶל־יְהוָה בָּעֵת הַהִוא לֵאמֹר

I pleaded with the Lord at that time saying:

Moses is pleading on his own behalf. In the next verses of text, Moses makes clear how frustrated he is that his plea to enter the land of Israel has been denied.

> Ibn Ezra suggests that he did it to impress on the Israelites the great virtue of living in the land of Israel; it was the one thing he yearned for that was denied him. Others suggest that he was trying to teach that one should never lose hope; our deepest prayers may yet be answered. The Midrash understood this unusual verb (*hithannen)* as meaning "to throw oneself at the mercy of the other, to plead with no grounds to justify one's request" (Deut. R. 2:1). A truly righteous person never assumes God owes anyone a favorable response.[22]

Using this root, *chanan,* the biblical writers infuse into Moses' words a sense of begging for mercy from God. The root alone indicates the emotion from Moses' lips.

In Isaiah, we see this root again used powerfully. He assures the people that when they cry out to God for help, God will be gracious and answer them.

כִּי־עַם בְּצִיּוֹן יֵשֵׁב בִּירוּשָׁלַם בָּכוֹ לֹא־תִבְכֶּה חָנוֹן יָחְנְךָ
לְקוֹל זַעֲקֶךָ כְּשָׁמְעָתוֹ עָנָךְ׃

> Indeed, O people in Zion, dwellers of Jerusalem, you shall not have cause to weep. He will *grant you His favor* at the sound of your cry; He will respond as soon as He hears it (Isaiah 30:19).

These verses give us some insight into why our biblical ancestors freely called out to God. Like us today, at the core of their being, they hoped for mercy from above.

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[22] David L. Lieber and Jules Harlow, eds., *Etz Hayim,* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 2001), 1005.

There are also words in the Bible that denote calling out to God. The roots *qara'* and *se'aq* are seen in these cases. "This crying out of people in trouble and suffering is one of the thematic threads of the Scriptures. Only rarely are the actual words or prayers of those who cried out given...it is likely that the prayers for help of the Psalter best represent the articulation of this outcry."[23] Another word *shavati* meaning "my cry" is used in biblical prayer. This word seems to specifically denote that the pray-er is poor, oppressed, weak or in need of healing. This root appears the most often in Job and the Psalms. Like silent crying to God, there is also a notion in the Bible of meditation to God which can be silent or accompanied by groans and even words.[24]

Can we surmise from our discussion of these various prayer words that pray-ers were conscious of which words to utilize depending on the particular situation that arose? Or, do these words indicate even more the literary construction of prayer in the Bible with the writers using technical terminology to connote different kinds of prayer? In either case, the different terms for prayer must have been understood by the biblical audience. Today, we also have many words in English for calling out to God. On the one hand it seems that being so conscious of technical prayer-terms takes away from spontaneously praying to God. On the other hand, it may help pray-ers to begin the sometimes awkward process of prayer by knowing which words have special connotations. If one finds him or herself in need of healing, he or she may choose one word. If praying for insight and strength to deal with a particular situation, we can employ a different word. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav is said to have addressed the problem of one who wanted to prayer but did not know how to begin.

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[23] Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 45.
[24] Psalm 77:3, Psalm 19:14

> A Hasid came to Rebbe Nachman and said to him, "I want to pray to tell God everything I am going through, and ask for help, but when I'm finally alone and try to pray, the words don't come." "Then," the Rebbe assured him, "even just calling out to God, 'Ribbono Shel Olam!' again and again is extremely beneficial."[25]

Thus, we see that from biblical days onward, having a prayer vocabulary to draw on when beginning the act of prayer helps immensely.

IV. Fluidity between Ritualistic and Spontaneous Prayer

Most prayer in the Bible is not presented as spontaneous. Some prayer is presented as ritualistic and quite formal. The situation that prompts the prayer may be unique and urgent, but the type of prayer may be fixed. Thus, there is fluidity between spontaneous and formal worship. Greenberg suggests that the Bible presents both professional prayers and lay prayers. He writes that it is not through liturgy such as psalms that we learn about everyday people and their prayers. The psalms are examples of professional poets; they are eloquent and full of noble religious sentiment. "Though the laity may have appropriated them for use in the temple...we cannot draw from psalms or their conjectured life settings a picture of everyday, spontaneous piety in biblical Israel."[26] Balentine agrees. He writes, "Prayers embedded in narrative contexts often provide insight into the literary and theological functions of prayer not afforded in the Psalms."[27]

However, as Nahum Sarna points out in *Songs of the Heart*, many of the psalms, while carefully and poetically crafted, arose from an experience in the world that

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[25] Adapted by Moshe Mykoff and S.C. Mizrahi from the traditions about Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, *The Gentle Weapon* (Vermont: Jewish Lights: 2004), 22.
[26] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 6.
[27] Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 18.

prompted the spontaneous desire to mark the experience with prayer. "In short, the psalms constitute a revealing portrayal of the human condition."[28] S.E. Gillingham agrees with this point of view. Citing Claus Westermann, a German scholar, he writes:

> The psalms are not only important literary poems about the individual or the nation; nor are they simply cultic texts applicable only to a pre-exilic cult; they are also examples of prayerful reflections on life, and as such, they represent the two basic experiences of prayer- praise and lament.[29]

In this light, many of the prayers in the psalms, while of a different sort than short outbursts to God, may also reflect unique experiences in the world rather than having been composed for general worship rites. In this way, their nature seems twofold. On the one hand, prayers in the Psalms seem to be personal and specific. Simultaneously, they can be easily broadened and are endlessly capable of appropriation by others across generations who have had similar experiences.

This brings up several important facets of biblical spontaneous prayer which can also be applied to spontaneous prayer over the ages. After a prayer has been appropriated by others for private or cultic worship, it loses its essence of being spontaneous only in that the prayer is taken out of its original context or moment of creation. However, personal, private, and highly specific sentiment and intention may be infused into a prayer's recitation of another's words, which imbues the prayer with a timeless spontaneous quality.

Second, sometimes a situation arises in which a person is prompted to pray and the sentiment and goal of reaching out to God is particular, personal, and spontaneous. The fact that the person takes out a writing utensil and crafts a careful and thoughtful

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[28] Nahum M. Sarna, *Songs of the Heart* (New York: Schocken Books: 1993), 3.
[29] S.E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1994), 187.

prayer to God rather than, or in addition to, calling out to God from the pit of the soul means that the final written prayer is still imbued with a highly spontaneous quality that should not be overlooked. Psalm 8 is a wonderful example of a prayer written as such. "The spontaneous response of the psalmist to the immeasurable grandeur of the nocturnal scene is adoration of its Creator..."[30] One can imagine the writer, who after observing in awe the magnificent starry sky, feels the urge to thank God and humble himself before His creator.

There may be differences in purpose between prose prayer and psalmic prayer. Both kinds of prayers are used by humans to connect to God in some way, but prose prayers are not intended for ritualistic purposes in the Bible. This brings up an interesting question for us today as we think about the role, if any, that spontaneous prayer can and should play in the synagogue. The Bible portrays prayer in the sacrificial cult as being structured and formulaic only. "Prose prayers do not occur in a cultic (religious) Sitz im Leben (situation in life), but solely within the narrative context in which they occur."[31]

Another major difference between these two genres of prayer is that prose prayer is specific in nature and the prayers of the psalms are for more general use and application. They describe general experiences to which anyone can relate and express sentiments to God which can be applied to numerous situations over and over. Prose prayer is appropriate for the specific context, while psalms are appropriate for many contexts. "What distinguishes these prayers [prose from psalm] is that they appear to be

[30] Nahum M. Sarna, *Songs of the Heart*, 51-52.
[31] Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 22.

freely composed in accordance with particular life-settings; the putative authors and their function are supplied by their context."[32]

V. Different Genres of Spontaneous Prayer

Although it may be a sign of selflessness to pray in thanksgiving, many of the private prayers in the Bible are petitionary in nature.

> [Petitionary prayers] arise out of a particular, momentary need, and may be uttered anywhere...unmediated, [they] open with an address, invoking God by name, to which may be added descriptive attributes. The heart of the prayer, the petition, is formulated in "imperatives"- here, of course, expressing what the pray-er begs God to do, rather than commands him.[33]

The shortest of these prayers is Moses' prayer to God to heal his sister Miriam after she was struck with leprosy for speaking ill against Moses.

וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵ֣ל נָ֣א רְפָ֣א נָ֣א לָ֔הּ׃

O God, pray heal her! (Numbers 12:13).

We see even in this short prayer the characteristic structure of petitionary prayer. Moses addresses God. Then, he uses the *qal* imperative *rifah* meaning heal, which signals the heart of his petition. As Balentine points out, the use of the verb "cry- *yitzak*" is used by people suffering. Moses suffers because his sister suffers. The prayer is immediately efficacious. God hears and heals.[34]

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[32] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 7.
[33] Ibid.10.
[34] Berakhot 34a records: "One who seeks divine mercy for his friend need not mention his name while praying for him. For when Moses prayed for Miriam it says that he said, "Please God, please heal her," without mentioning Miriam's name, and we may follow suit. The Maharil cited by Magen Avraham 119:1

Another interesting case of spontaneous petitionary prayer is in Jonah when the sailors pray before they throw him overboard.

וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אָנָּה יְהוָה אַל־נָא נאבְדָה בְנֶפֶשׁ
הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְאַל־תִּתֵּן עָלֵינוּ דָּם נָקִיא כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה כַּאֲשֶׁר
חָפַצְתָּ עָשִׂיתָ׃

> Then they cried to the Lord: "Oh, please, Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person! For You, O Lord, by Your will, have brought this about" (Jonah 1:14).

Here these heathen sailors follow the petitionary style of the Israelites. They address the God of Israel. They petition God using cohortative and jussive forms which show urgency and the component of begging God. Greenberg writes:

> Either the author...ascribed to them a peculiarly Israelite practice, or, on the contrary, he recognized that extemporized lay prayer was not peculiar to Israel. Evidence of such prayers in the ancient east from outside of Israel is very meager.[35]

This comment suggests that although this particular structure of petitionary prayer may have been unique to ancient Israel, the idea of spontaneous prayer for help existed throughout the ancient world.[36] This structure of address and petition mirrors the way humans petition each other as well. Thus, although we are clearly reading a literary creation in the prayer of the sailors in the Book of Jonah, it may be a mirror into the actual petitionary prayer-life of the author of the text.

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said that this is only true when one prays in the presence of the person. If not, the name should be mentioned.

[35] See note 7 to lecture 1 in Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*

[36] Etan Levine disagrees with Greenberg. See "Development of Biblical Prayer" in *Dor Le Dor* 9:4 [36] (1981), pp. 172-173. He writes, "Every student of comparative religion or of the ancient Near East knows, without exception the ancients mediated with the Divine by means of sacrifice and rite, and not by means of conversation! Whatever words may have been uttered, petitions voiced or paeans recited were all addenda to the sacrificial act itself...ancient Israel was a prayer-conscious community, and prayer was an essential feature of Israelite religion. And this is without parallel in the ancient world."

Although Greenberg and others urge modern readers to see the fluidity between spontaneous and structured prayer, Greenberg writes that there is a main difference between petitionary prayer and fixed prayer.

> The content of [private petitionary prayer] is tailored to the circumstances in which it arises...These features distinguish the embedded petitionary prayers from institutionalized forms of worship-sacrifice and other temple rituals and psalms. These are the properties of experts; their details are fixed and prescribed. A unit of them—a given sacrifice, a given psalm is—infinitely reusable or repeatable, since it is not determined by specific circumstances.[37]

What Greenberg does not comment on is the notion that just because a psalm or a cultic incantation is reusable does not mean that it isn't imbued with a highly spontaneous, personal and specific quality each time it is uttered. In addition, the lines of what constitutes "structured prayers" get blurred because although petitionary prayer can be done by anyone at anytime, anywhere (unlike cultic prayers) they seem to follow the same general rubrics whether consciously or unconsciously, at least as presented in our texts. Thus, although they flow from the heart, the words follow a pattern.

We have seen how the biblical characters petition God. Are their prayer-patterns that different from how they petition each other? Greenberg points out similarities in word choice and phrasing among petitionary speeches whether directed to God or another person. This can be seen in the following examples. The first interchange is between Abraham and God and the second is between two people:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַל־נָא יִחַר לַאדֹנָי וַאֲדַבְּרָה

> And he [Abraham] said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I go on..." (Gen. 18: 30).

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[37] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 17.

וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנִי יְדַבֶּר־נָא עַבְדְּךָ דָבָר

> Then Judah went up to him [Joseph] and said, "Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord...." (Gen. 44:18).

In the first case, Abraham petitions God. In the second case, Judah petitions Joseph. Both cases show lower-status people petitioning a higher-status power. Both use the phrase, "My Lord" to either connote God or a higher-up. Both petition for permission to speak. In this case, it seems that we can say that the language of prayer follows inter-human speech patterns.

Greenberg shows this link with a fascinating interpretation of the ritual-confession scheme laid out in Numbers 5:7 and Leviticus 5:5. In both cases, confession has to be done before a sacrifice for repudiation can be offered. Greenberg writes:

> It is remarkable that amidst all the minute particulars into which the lawmaker goes, the wording of the confession is not be found. The lawmaker evidently supposed that the commoner was capable on his own of formulating it properly. What justified such confidence? We surmise: the practice of modeling confessionary prayer after the pattern of interhuman confessionary speech-a simple, natural pattern, corresponding to the dynamics of the transaction and therefore known to everyone.[38]

Another case in which the biblical characters spontaneously pray in ways that model speech-patterns is in the occasion of *barukh* prayers.[39] The following two examples show that the same words of thanks can be said to God or to a fellow person to whom the other

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[38] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 30.

[39] Wayne S. Towner, "'Blessed Be YHWH' and 'Blessed Art Thou, YHWH': The Modulation of a Biblical Formula", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 30 (1968) 386-399. There are only two occurrences of *barukh attah Adonai* in the Bible- I Chron 29:10, Ps. 119:12. Towner writes that this phrase is directed at God specifically, while "Blessed be Adonai" is only *about* God. The *barukh attah* formula which appears sporadically but not consistently in the Qumran liturgical texts becomes standard in rabbinic prayer. See Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 104-122.

is indebted with gratitude. First we have the case of Abraham's servant, Eliezer praying to God in thanks.

וַיֹּאמֶר בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנִי אַבְרָהָם

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of my servant Abraham..." (Gen. 24:27). Commenting on this case of blessing, Wayne S. Towner writes, "The setting of the *brakha* in Genesis 24:27 has nothing to do with formal prayer or cults; instead it is the presentation by an individual of a spontaneous reaction to a divine favor which he has received."[40]

Likewise, David, grateful to Abigail that she kept him from killing Nabal's household says:

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד לַאֲבִיגַיִל בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

"David said to Abigail, "Praised be the Lord, the God of Israel..." (I Sam. 25:32). Both instances of relief and joy make use of the phrase, "Blessed be YHVH, God of..." Unlike more formalized *barukh* prayers, which are uttered from a person directly to God, these spontaneous personal prayers are directed as much to other people as they are to God alone. There is a sense that the person wants all to know that God has provided for him or her.[41]

I Kings 8:56 is an example of a more formal cultic use of the blessing rubric.

בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן מְנוּחָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל

Praised be the Lord who has granted a haven to His people Israel.

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[40]Towner, "Blessed be YHWH," 388.
[41] Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 32.

In this verse, Solomon is praying at the dedication of the first temple. It begins like other *barukh* statements. What makes this prayer different is that it is offered in a cultic setting.

Asking God to bless us makes perfect theological sense. What, however, does it mean when we bless God? Does invoking, "Blessed be Adonai" insinuate that God can be enhanced and that we have the power to affect God? It is plausible, writes Greenberg, that the ancients thought that there were forces outside of God to which God was subject. In this schema, man could invoke a blessing for God to be successful in the cosmos. Just as David (I Sam 25:32) blesses both God and a person in one breath, it must have been natural that gratitude for human favor was coupled with acknowledgement that it came ultimately from the grace of God. Once more polytheistic notions of the cosmos had disappeared, it was still appropriate to bless God because this word *barukh* was the way to communicate thanks.

> Extemporized benedictions of God are of the same pattern throughout the scriptures, just as extemporized benedictions of man are. This means that the biblical narrators all portrayed speech between man and God on the analogy of speech between humans. Such a procedure accords perfectly with the personal conception of God in the Scriptures; the only analogy available for intercourse with him was the human-personal.[42]

Balentine makes an interesting distinction between prayer-language and spoken-language directed at God, while acknowledging that the two are related. He writes, "Prayer has to have intentionality behind it, which makes it distinguishable from more general forms of communication."[43] This is a crucial point to consider. The way we talk and pray to God is based on the way we speak to others. As we have seen, it is difficult to isolate certain words as being only used in the realm of prayer. Thus, Balentine's suggestion that

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[42] Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 36.
[43] Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible*, 31.

intentionality is the distinguishing marker between prayer to God and speech to God is extremely helpful. Intentionality can be gleaned from context and content.

We have seen that there is a close association between prayer structures and conversation structures. Was there a kind of prayer that existed in the ancient world that consisted of fixed language as distinct from typical speech? Yehezkel Kaufmann argued that "almost all the prayers found in Scripture belong to specific pray-ers and to specific occasions...[with] no set wording." He writes that "we do not know whether in pre-exilic times fixed prayers were current-prayers whose wording was set."[44] Others, including Sigmund Mowinckel, argue that set prayer predates spontaneous prayer. Greenberg cautions, "At bottom, this dichotomy [between fixed and unfixed prayers] fails to appreciate the mixture of spontaneity and prescription in all social behavior—particularly in a traditional society."[45]

There are benefits to having rubrics for prayer within which one can be creative and personal.

> Such conventions are what enable every cultured person to play his momentary role by filling the empty lines of the patterns with substance tailored to the situation. They make spontaneity possible precisely because they free the individual from the burden of sizing up the varied situations that come his way and deciding on the spot what appropriate components of discourse, what topics, are dictated by them. The components are supplied by the conventions attached to the situation; it falls to the individual to infuse the specific content into them according to circumstances.[46]

The biblical authors presumably wrote about people praying because in their religious society, prayer was commonplace. However, Greenberg points out that there may be a deeper reason to record such prayers. He notes that there may be religious

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[44] Y. Kaufmann, *Toldot ha'emunah hayisr'elit II* [Tel Aviv, 1946], 502.
[45] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 44.
[46] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 44.

implications to the notion that anyone can pray and be heard by God in the Bible. He suggests that the biblical authors were trying to separate "prayer" from "magic" or incantation which required professionals to administer.[47]

In this way, biblical writers not only mirror the reality of their day, but can influence the prayer style through their writing. This is the difference between spontaneous prayer and prayer used in ritualistic ways. Sympathetic magic, incantation, sacrifice, and ritualistic recitation are all formulaic methods of connecting with the deity using fixed words. The words are more stilted than everyday conversation and can be said by anyone for general worship occasions such as festivals, harvests, or sin offerings. By comparison, spontaneous prayer is used by individuals who feel that they are in unique situations in life. In these cases people call out to God as they would to a fellow person. They praise God, describe their situation, and beg for help or aim to praise.

It is important to understand how spontaneous prayer is presented in the Bible and to look at examples of such prayer so that we can describe and analyze this seemingly innate human response to deep pain or awesome joy that we still find ourselves having. Since the Bible, Jews have understood the need for private, spontaneous prayer. Even the early prayer books contained flexibility and openness for people to utter their own words to God outside the rubric of the fixed service. The rabbis commented on the silent prayers of the Bible—the spontaneous personal prayers of faith, and even wrote their own private prayers to God. While today Jews may be losing the art of spontaneously praying to God, recapturing the biblical essence of such prayers may help us gain vocabulary and scenarios for such prayer that resonate with us even today.

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[47] Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 48.

Chapter 2: Spontaneous Prayer in Rabbinic Times

I. The Interplay between Spontaneous and Communal Jewish Prayer

The Bible depicts many different forms of worship including personal spontaneous prayer, group spontaneous prayer and formalized prayer. Group spontaneous prayer occurs when the people as a whole cry out to God in unison. Some of the psalms may have been examples of formalized prayers associated with the Temple. If the Bible mirrors the reality of its time, this lends credence to the notion that both spontaneous and formal prayer existed in ancient Israelite religion.

We know that communities in the land of Israel, at the time of the second Temple and after it was destroyed, continued to use biblical prayer as the model for their own prayer structures. For instance, virtually all of the vocabulary shared by Qumran and rabbinic prayers has a basis in biblical stock prayer language.[1] However, because of the relative paucity of evidence for different kinds of prayer from this time, scholars continue to debate how prayer actually developed in different places, in different times, and among different sects or social groups.

Stefan Reif reiterates the point that, while Jews never stopped praying spontaneously as they had done since biblical days, at some point the liturgical focus became one of communal prayer. He writes, "Ample evidence attests to an extensive practice of private prayer from the time of the earliest books of the Hebrew Bible and to a complicated interplay between the spontaneous devotions of the individual, on a regular

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[1] Richard Sarason, "Communal Prayer at Qumran and Among the Rabbis: Certainties and Uncertainties," in Esther G. Chazon, ed., *Liturgical Perspectives: Prayer and Poetry in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Proceedings of the Fifth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature. 19-23* January, 2000 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), 175.

basis or on occasions of special need, and the formal liturgy of the cult throughout the early history of Judaism."[2] Before the Temple fell, Reif argues, worship consisted of sacrifice of animals as well as sacrifice of the lips.

> The small tightly knit group that organized the return and ran the affairs of the numerically and insignificant country of Judah was apparently able to make some moves towards merging the ideas and practice relating to individual prayer and institutionalized communal worship that had existed more separately in earlier times. As a result, formal, communal elements were incorporated into personal prayers and the Temple Mount gradually became the center for more than the sacrificial cult, but there is no reason to presuppose that improvised, personal entreaties had become any less popular than they had earlier been.[3]

Into the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Reif writes, "prayers continued to be recited wherever there were Jews but there is not yet any concrete evidence of a fixed communal liturgy, particularly not of a proto-rabbinic variety."[4]

For the most part, formal language was instituted for times when a prayer leader was conducting ritual on behalf of others as an intermediary to God. A major question of debate is to what extent fixed prayer existed outside the Temple at that time and whether fixed prayers were recited in a communal fashion. Sarason supports Ezra Fliescher's view that "the existence before 70 of regularized, communal, liturgical prayer in any groups outside of Qumran remains speculative."[5] The practice of communal prayer associated with sunrise, sunset and other seasonal times seem to have been unique to the pietist, sectarian view of Qumran. There is no evidence for a "widely diffused custom of daily communal prayer before 70."[6] So, how and why did communal prayer become the norm after 70?

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[2] Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge: University Press: 1993), 61.
[3] Ibid. 61.
[4] Ibid. 47.
[5] Ibid. 181.
[6] Richard Sarason, "Communal Prayer at Qumran." 165.

> We do not know whether the Rabbis bore the primary responsibility for the diffusion and institutionalization of public prayer in synagogues after 70, or whether this was a process with a dynamic and logic of its own in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, or even whether these two alternatives form a false dichotomy.[7]

On the basis of human nature and biblical accounts, it seems that Israelites/Judeans always spontaneously prayed on an individual basis. The discussion of spontaneous prayer becomes complicated when a more fixed, communal liturgical tradition begins to emerge. We already know from our discussion of biblical prayer that there is a fluidity between fixed and spontaneous prayer within Judaism. It is not correct to draw an immutable line between private prayer from the heart and communal prayer involving reciting fixed words. Individual intention blurs the lines between what is spontaneous and what is fixed. The rabbis' versions of communal prayer left considerable room for the recitation of individual, personal prayers in this context. "The very clear preference of our classic tradition is for private prayer to be voiced in the midst of the congregation at prayer."[8] When communal prayer started and what forms it took are important points for our discussion of spontaneous prayer in that we are concerned with exactly how fixed communal prayer looked at the beginning. As Sarason has pointed out, early rabbinic prayers were not completely fixed.

> Only the beginnings and ending appear to have been fixed; the "middle" might be improvised on the basis of stock, conventional prayer language, just as a contemporary rhetor would improvise on a stock theme or text.[9]

Although prayer was becoming more stereotyped in terms of wording and themes, Jewish prayer was not set immediately following the fall of Temple. "The development of the

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[7] Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, 166
[8] David S. Lieb, "On Private Prayer: A Covenantal Experience," *CCAR Journal*, Fall 1998, 48.
[9] Richard Sarason, "The Intersections of Qumran and Rabbinic Judaism: The Case of Prayer Texts and Liturgies," in *Dead Sea Discoveries* 8 (2001), 179.

relatively uniform prayer texts that we know today can be understood as a gradual process, continuing past the point of the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud."[10] As Elbogen has written, "The liturgy of today is the fruit of a thousand years' development."[11]

Another great scholar of liturgy, Joseph Heinemann, reiterates the points of both Reif and Elbogen when he postulates that Jewish prayer developed from being highly spontaneous to assuming a partially fixed communal quality by the Second Temple Period. Heinemann sees the formal synagogue liturgy as a new form of worship, different from psalms and different from spontaneous prayer.

> Neither the spontaneous prayers of individuals (nor, for that matter, of the community as a whole when the occasion demanded), nor the cultic prayer-hymns of the Levites are the equivalents of the institution of fixed, communal prayer, which constituted a radical innovation of the Second Temple period, and which made an indelible impress on the entire religious life of the people by providing them with a completely novel form of religious expression.[12]

Heinemann does note the interplay between the different prayer modes and how they influenced each other. He reminds us that although it may seem that Jewish prayer is highly formalized and fixed, it was not always this way. This is important to remember because it lends credibility to the desire to pray spontaneously as a Jew. As well, it gives Jewish prayer a depth of individuality when we remember its origins. Jewish prayers were originally the outpourings of both the Rabbis and common people. Heinemann writes:

> The characteristic idioms and forms of prayer, and indeed the statutory prayers of the synagogue themselves, were not in the first place products of the deliberations of the Rabbis in their academies, but were rather the spontaneous, on-the-spot

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[10] Ruth Langer, "Revisiting Early Rabbinic Liturgy: The Recent Contributions of Ezra Fleischer", Prooftexts (19:2) 1998, 179-204.
[11] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 1993), 4.
[12] Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter: 1977), 14.

> improvisations of the people who gathered on various occasions to pray in the synagogue...The first stage in the development of the liturgy was characterized by diversity and variety- and the task of the Rabbis was to systematize and to impose order on this multiplicity of forms, patterns and structures.[13]

Jakob Petuchowski, another giant of the study of liturgy, explains that Jews have prayed spontaneously since the days of the Bible, into the rabbinic period, and up to today. He writes:

> [When Moses prayed] he was not likely to have used a prayer which someone else had written for him. His prayers were prayers of pure kavanah; and so were the prayers of all the other biblical figures who are portrayed as having prayed. There was no prayer book in the biblical period. There was no actual *book* of prayers in the Rabbinic period. In fact, the Rabbis were opposed to the writing down of prayers...not until the ninth century C.E. do we get a written Order of Service for Jewish worship.[14]

There was never an end to the acceptability of spontaneous Jewish prayer. Neither during the time of the Temple nor after it fell did there cease to be occasions for Jews to create their own prayers. As we have seen, prayer is a product of the times and is influenced by culture and language, historical events, and theological beliefs that change over time. There is little doubt that as prayer came to be recorded and organized, it had an impact on the way individuals spoke to God.

II. Fixing Prayer *Themes*, Not Wording

Elbogen asserts that one way order was imposed onto the act of spontaneous prayer was to fix themes according to which one's own words could flow. These themes reflected the everyday concerns of individuals. During worship, the pray-er would speak extemporaneously on a given subject. This created an individual and highly personalized prayer experience within the same shared order and thematic structure of the *kahal*.

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[13] Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 37.
[14] Jakob Josef Petuchowski, *Understanding Jewish Prayer* (KTAV: 1972), 3.

> At first there was no fixed liturgy, for the prayers were not set down in writing; only the gist of their context was fixed, while their formulation was provided by the presenter in his own words. Public prayer was brief, and when it came to an end, the individual worshipper laid out his own petition in silence.[15]

Elbogen explains that little by little the prayers of certain individuals which were especially eloquent or universal began to be recited by more and more pray-ers. The Rabbis of the Talmud viewed with favor those who could extemporaneously pray on the spot and ridiculed those who recited the words developed by another. The Talmud records prohibitions against writing down prayers lest they become fixed. Perhaps the warning related to the fear that written prayers would come to be used as magical incantations. In Shabbat 14:4 we read that "Those who write benedictions are like those who burn the Torah." At the same time, Sarason notes:

> To the extent that liturgical prayer is conceived as a ritual activity whose purpose, as ritual, is to enact the divine cosmic order, it will tend intrinsically to become more formalized. So the tension in rabbinic prayer between spontaneity and heartfelt engagement, on the one hand, and routinization and repetition of the other, exists from the very outset and is, I would maintain, endemic to the very enterprise.[16]

It is no wonder that *Siddurim*, or collections of prayers, did not emerge until after the sixth century.

By the time certain wordings became favored by the Rabbis, it was natural to fix these prayers as part of the daily service. Sages fixed the mention of certain subjects and certain idioms as obligatory, as *halachic*. Heinemann explains that each worshipper was still basically allowed to formulate his own benedictions as long as he mentioned in them those items and idioms which had become normalized.[17] The Rabbis began to require

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[15] Jakob Josef Petuchowski, *Understanding Jewish Prayer*, 3.
[16] Richard Sarason, "Communal Prayer at Qumran." 169-170
[17] Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 51.

that mention be made of certain items in certain benedictions. For example, the Mishna records that when saying the Shema, "The Exodus is mentioned at night."[18]

As prayers which at one time were known through aural memory got written down and their wording became more fixed, the spontaneous quality of Jewish prayer which had so characterized it for centuries began to change. Many liturgists have pointed out that the source of all written prayer was prayer that had been spoken spontaneously at one time. Idelsohn writes, "Private devotion has been the source out of which fixed public and private worship sprang forth."[19] When another's words have become standard liturgy for all to recite, it is often forgotten that these words were once spoken freely from the heart by a particular person at a certain time and place. Elbogen writes:

> The prayer of the individual was displaced little by little until it vanished completely from public worship...There crystallized little by little a stock of prayers that was in use every day of the year, though with minor changes on particular days; and since these prayers were closely attached to the old nucleus of the prayers, we call them 'statutory prayers.'[20]

While prayer leaders no longer created prayers aloud for all to hear, there remained within the service room for worshipers to say their own prayers silently.

III. The Change to Fixed Prayer Was Slow and Organic

During the late Amoraic period, it was no longer permissible to merely set themes under which prayers could be devised. "It was felt necessary to fix exact wordings of the opening formula, the concluding eulogy, and ultimately certain important phrases in the

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[18] Mishna Berakhot 1:5. See also Joseph Heinemann. *Prayer in the Talmud*, 51. He cites y. Berakhot 1, 3d as an example of required wording in the Shema.
[19] A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Development* (New York: Sacred Music Press of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion: 1932), 257.
[20] Ibid. 257.

body of the benediction itself."[21] Ready-made phrases and prayer language helped anyone searching for words to express that which was in his heart. Heinemann notes that it did not matter whether the context in which the prayer had been written was known or remembered. If the sentiment spoke to the pray-er, the words could be co-opted.[22] Words written in one context may speak to someone in a totally different time or situation in the same way that the author or poet intended or in ways the author could not have dreamed of.

Heinemann also reminds us that the endeavor to bring uniformity to the liturgy was initially only directed at the statutory prayers of the public service: the Amidah, the recitation of the Shema and its benedictions, and to a lesser extent Birkat Hamazon.[23] Even the early *siddurim*, such as that of Rav Amram Gaon of Sura in the ninth century, reflected multiple versions of prayers, highlighting flexibility within structure.

> There is a constant dialectic which pervades the development of Jewish liturgy—two tendencies which exist simultaneously. On the one hand there is the outpouring of spontaneous prayer expression. On the other is the tendency to record, to codify, to maintain the prayers of the past...The siddur, the Jewish prayerbook which has developed over the ages, is a result of this dialectic.[24]

Barton Lee comments that the process which developed from free open expression to reading fixed words on a page took place slowly and over time. We have to remember that even though there were early prayer books which provided fixed wording, it was not until the advent of the printing press that all Jews read from the prayer books during worship. At first, variations of the same prayer often existed side by side, and the same

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[21] Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 52.
[22] Ibid. 56.
[23] See t. Berakhot 1:9, b. Berakhot 40b, as well as Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 157.
[24] Barton Lee, "The Private Prayers of the Rabbis", 2.

prayers differed in wording from community to community. This can be seen in the existence of two parallel Ahavah prayers.

> In the early period of prayer development, there were no specific word requirements for the blessings. Rather, flexibility obtained. Certain elements came to be included in similar blessings, and as these formulations grew more popular, they became the accepted usage. Only then did the sages coin specific elements which they required for the blessings in order to achieve consistency and uniformity of practice.[25]

Thus, we can see that prayer development was an organic process.

> The process of the development of a fixed liturgy was a gradual one; it took place throughout the Talmudic period. Prayers at first were spoken spontaneously; certain forms and patterns became popular and accepted. The usages were then codified; rules and requirements were enacted to bring consistency and uniformity to Jewish worship. In the early development, much flexibility was still involved; the requirement of specific prayer texts was a rather late phenomenon. Within the fixed liturgy there remained freedom to innovate and to expand. Even after the formal arrangement of the blessings of the tefillah in the generation of Rabban Gamaliel, this freedom in large measure remained.[26]

There has probably always been a desire to have new and creative liturgy to add interest to the service or to add relevance to worship. Thus, it is not surprising that there emerged the genre of liturgical poems, *piyyutim*, which was highly personalized and timely.

> The flowering of piyyut in Palestine as, originally, replacement of the community's customary prose texts, can be understood as a continuation of the basic flexibility with which statutory prayer was established there.
> Beginning in the fourth, fifth, or sixth century, soon after the recording of prayer in writing was permitted, there arose another type of expression- free poetic composition based on religious teachings, particularly on the themes of the festivals. These were called piyyutim, a term derived from Greek. The piyyut brought into the liturgy a dynamic element that lent it variety. Its character was formed and its content fixed by artistic taste and religious outlook, which varied considerably from country and period. The piyyut was entirely optional.[27]

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[25] Rabbi Barton Lee, "The Private Prayers of the Rabbis" 10.
[26] Ibid. 12-13.
[27] Ibid. 12-13.

Piyyutim, from the Greek, meaning poetry, are examples in our liturgy of original creative prayers. They were first written in the Byzantine period in the land of Israel. Later, many were composed in medieval Europe.[28] They are specific and personal, yet fit beautifully into the fixed rubrics of the worship service. However, important to note is that although individually authored, they are communal in address, not meant for private use. *Piyyutim* were mostly written with the larger service in mind and can even be read as substitutes for key prayers, especially on festivals, because their themes and language mirror the main prayers of the siddur. The *piyyutim* were often written using the poetic acrostic device. As well, rhyming schemes are used. Biblical verses are woven in and out of these poetic prayers, as are *midrashic* references. We find *piyyutim* in every service of the Jewish year. Composing *piyyutim* was a way liturgists maintained the creative variety and novelty of prayer.[29]

IV. The Amidah as an Example of Spontaneous Prayer

It was not only *piyyutim* which allowed for personal expression. The Amidah, the core of the worship service, has built within its rubric time for personal prayer. The Talmud explains the tradition of praying a silent Amidah in which only the lips mouth the words as having a biblical precedent in Hannah's silent, spontaneous prayer for a son.[30] "The teachers of the Babylonian Talmud already recognized in Hannah's prayer referred to in I Samuel 1:10-16 the *locus classicus* for the correct behavior in undertaking such

[28] Richard Sarason, "Midrash in Liturgy," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner, and Alan J. Avery-Peck; 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J Brill, 2004) 1: 484.
[29] There will more be discussion of *piyyutim* in Chapter 3.
[30] b. Berakhot 31a

religious exercise."[31] As Reif notes, this kind of silent, personal prayer "is totally outside the realm of the institutional cult, and often dialectical enough to be characterized almost as an exchange between equals. Rather than taking its place among priestly rituals, such a form of communication with God seems more closely related to the personal invocation of blessings and curses or the individual's impositions on himself of oaths and vows."[32]

The notion that Jewish prayer feels at times like a conversation between equals has roots in biblical prayer. On one hand, the worshipper cries out to God in demanding and forceful language as if the pray-er and God are equals or as if God owes the pray-er something. On the other hand, prayer can be as between two friends in which the pray-er uses sweet, complimentary words to God. In either case, the pray-er believes that his or her fate is in the hands of God alone and thus God is always higher and more powerful. At times, Jewish prayer is as a child to a parent, a sheep to the shepherd, a subject to the king, a sinner to the judge. At other times praying to God is like a wife whispering to her husband. All of these aspects are represented in the different benedictions of the Amidah.

In terms of the Amidah, the Rabbis struggled with creating a prayer schema that would retain its spontaneity while having set features. *Keva* (fixed), for the Rabbis, meant being unable to say something new in prayer and simply repeating the words composed by another. Since this was not the ideal in prayer, when the rabbis spoke of fixing prayer, they were not referring to fixing exact wording as would be done after the printing press. "Fixed" referred to the number and content of benedictions and the wording of the *chatimot*. Even this seems to have been a necessary act more than a desired one.

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[31] Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge: University Press: 1993), 33 as well as b. Berakhot 31a-b

[32] Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, 33.

In addition to the silent Amidah being linked to Hannah's heartfelt prayer, it was also practical. The practice of saying the Prayer silently before the *shaliach tzibbur* spoke it aloud harkens back to a rabbinic prayer-formulation method. Before printed prayer manuals, the prayer leader was given time to arrange his thoughts and to choose his words before leading the congregation in the Amidah. "That the worshipper himself formulates his own wording on the spot is presupposed in the Mishnaic passage from Rosh Hashanah 4:6 which sets down rules for choosing the verses of *Malchiyot, Zichronot, Shofarot.*"[33]

The Talmud urges again and again that one's personal prayers be added into the Amidah rubric. "Do not make your Prayer[34] routine (fixed), but free supplications and petitions before God" (b. Berakhot 28b). Moreover, the Sages insisted that each worshipper express something new in his own prayers ever time that he prays (y. Berakhot 4, 8a, b. Berakhot 29b). For these reasons, people were urged to insert into the last of the intermediate benedictions their own personal petitions (b. Avodah Zara 8a). The Talmud explains that if one is afflicted with some trouble, he may add his own prayer in any of the intermediate benedictions (b. Berakhot 34). The Jerusalem Talmud records the process of adding one's own prayer in the Amidah. "The Rabbis say a man may request his needs in the blessing *shomayah tefillah*, who hears prayer" (y. Berakhot 1, 3d). Further, Rav is quoted as approving the practice whereby one might make his personal supplication at the end of each and every blessing. He is also quoted by R. Hiyya as making two specific suggestions. First, even though the Sages say that personal supplications are to be made in the *shomeyah tefillah* blessing, Rav maintains that if one

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[33] Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 46.

[34] The Amidah is referred to be many different names: The Prayer, The Tefillah, Shemoneh Esray, Amidah

has a sick person in his own house, he should pray for his welfare in the blessing for healing the sick. Secondly, Rav specifies that one who needs sustenance or livelihood should make his petition explicit in the *birkat hashanim*, the blessing for a good year.[35]

After studying the Rabbis' private prayers after the Amidah, Rabbi Barton Lee concludes that there are two themes that emerge: petitions for physical well-being and petitions for psychological and spiritual well-being.

> Regarding elements of physical well-being, we find that the rabbis had no embarrassment in praying for material things. The rabbis prayed for long life, sufficient livelihood, bodily strength, a life of wealth and honor...Healing, avoidance of suffering or illness...lives of goodness and blessing. Physical well being and psychological happiness are interdependent. One of the petitions appearing most frequently among the private prayers is that for peace.[36]

Although the practice continued for individuals to petition God *within* the Tefillah, there also developed the custom for the individual to recite his personal supplications immediately *after* the recitation of the Tefillah. "One does not say anything [recite any prayer] after *emet v'yatziv* but after the Tefillah he may say anything, even as long as the confession for the Day of Atonement" (b. Berakhot. 31a, Tosefta Berakhot 3:6). The private prayers recited after the Amidah were called, *nefilat apayim* falling on one's face or *tachanun*- supplication.[37]

Although the ideal, at least at first, was to utter personal prayers during the Amidah, certain lines became used by many and became more fixed. For instance, Rabbi Yohanan recommended that a biblical verse open and close the Amidah. For its opening, he recommends, "O Lord, open my lips that my mouth may declare your glory" (Psalm

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[35]Barton Lee, "The Private Prayers of the Rabbis," 20.
[36] Ibid. 95-98.
[37] See b. Berakhot 16b-17a.

51:17). For its conclusion, he recommended, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, My Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:15). When he concluded the Amidah, Mar ben Ravina used to say the following prayer:

> My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceit. And to those who curse me, let my soul be silent; and let my soul be like dust to everyone. Open my heart to Your Torah, and let my soul pursue Your commandments. And save me from evil mishap, from the Evil Inclination, from an evil woman and from all evil occurrences that happen to come into the world. And all those who design evil against me, speedily nullify their counsel and disrupt their design. May the expressions of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favor before You, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.[38]

His prayer is a wonderful example of a once spontaneous prayer turned fixed over the years. Reuven Hammer writes:

> The beauty of this prayer and its appropriateness are evident. It does seem a pity, however, that the opportunity for individual expression has been closed by having people recite yet another prayer already written and formulated. It would seem a good idea for us...to pause after reciting the Amida, concentrate our own feelings, and express them to God in whatever way we cam. A Hassidic story as it that a child once recited the letters of the alef-bet and asked God to arrange them as God thought appropriate, since God could do it so much better. Surely, then, we should not hesitate to give words to our own words and thoughts, thus making the occasion of standing before God in prayer more than a recitation of the words of the tradition. It becomes a time to say both ancient words, which help us feel a part of the entire Jewish past, and new words of our own making, which express our own ever-changing personal thoughts.[39]

Although the Rabbis wrote their own prayers to bookend the Amidah, their words have become our fixed liturgy. What Hammer reminds us of is to appreciate the once spontaneous nature of this central part of the worship service and to allow ourselves the same freedom the Rabbis felt to call out to God on our own.

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[38] b. Berakhot 17a

[39] Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer* (New York: Schocken Books: 1995), 189.

As we see, though, the Rabbis did not pull their words out of thin air. They relied heavily on different biblical verses to highlight their themes. Many of the rabbinic suggestions are still recited today. "In general, much freedom was allowed for individual pray-ers and generous space was allotted for expansions as long as their content was appropriate to the benediction."[40] Freehof writes that the Rabbis borrowed freely from biblical phrases in their prayers and used them intact or with changes that rendered them more suitable for their contextual usage.[41] Lee reiterates this point by writing that "The rabbis did not hesitate to rewrite biblical phrases, especially to make changes of number or person."[42] Thus, even when the Rabbis looked to the Bible for inspiration in their prayers, they felt free to change and adapt verses to fit their needs and desires for personal expression.

V. Why Was There Such an Emphasis on Individualizing Prayer?

The Talmud gives us our first clues as to why the Rabbis stressed that prayer should be personal. The Rabbis clearly deemed prayer to be effective in making God change His decree. They likened the prayer of the righteous to a spade. Just as the spade turns grain from place to place, so the prayers of the righteous turn the divine attributes from wrath to mercy.[43] The Rabbis went so far as to imagine that the Holy One also prayed and that God's words affected His actions. According to Rav Zutra bar Toviyah in the name of Rav, God's prayer is as follows:

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[40] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 1993), 54.
[41] Solomon Freehof, *Private Prayers in the Talmud* (Cincinnati: unpublished), 112-113.
[42] Barton Lee, "The Private Prayers of the Rabbis," 17.
[43] b. Berakhot 16b

> May it be My will that My mercy conquer My anger and that My mercy overcome My sterner attributes, and that I behave towards My children with the attribute of mercy, that for their sake I go beyond the boundary of judgment.[44]

In addition to the notion that prayer could affect one's situation in life, Lee suggests three other reasons for private prayer:

> One compelling reason for the outpouring of private prayer is that the religious person is never content with mere repetition of prayers composed by others, no matter how sacred, how beloved, how inspiring those prayers might be. Secondly, the fixed liturgy, despite its breadth, could not and did not provide adequate prayer expression for every occasion, every need, every hope, every sorrow which would evoke prayer...In private prayer, the needs of the individual are expressed with greater specificity. Finally, liturgical expression is not and can never become a closed matter. For the religious man always, somehow, has something more – petition, praise aspiration – to express.[45]

Lawrence Hoffman looks to the Book of Exodus for the reason why Jews have always wanted to personalize their prayers. He understands the narrative in Exodus 2:23-25 to be about the efficacy of prayer.

> A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Hoffman writes, "The redemption of the people beginning with God remembering His covenant is the result of the entreaty of the people. If they had not prayed, they would not have been redeemed. Prayer thus becomes the activating cause of the central event in Jewish history—the Exodus"[46] Hoffman's reading of Exodus highlights the theurgic quality of prayer.

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[44] b. Berakhot 7a
[45] Barton Lee, "The Private Prayers of the Rabbis," 24.
[46] Lawrence Hoffman, ed, *My People's Prayer Book, Vol. 2: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries--The Amidah* (Vermont: Jewish Lights: 1998), 2.

Hoffman also looks to the Zohar on Exodus 20a, which heaps lavish praise on the spontaneous prayer that arises directly from the human heart. The Zohar claims that the prayer we read about in Exodus chapter 2 was effective because it was the outpouring of individual souls. Rabbi Judah said, "Of all three expressions for prayer used in the Exodus narrative, crying out (tsa'akah) is the greatest of all because it is entirely a matter of the heart...this crying comes nearer to the Holy One blessed be He than imploring and praying in words." The Zohar says, "When people pray and weep and cry so intensely that they are unable to find words to express their sorrow, there is the perfect prayer, for it is in their heart, and this will never return to them empty" (Zohar, Exod. 20a). Hoffman concludes from his look at the Zohar that "spiritual prayer is inarticulate, internal, and individual."[47]

While reciting the Amidah is a communal way to petition God on a variety of subjects, it also has an individual quality. The Amidah is a wonderful example of the purposeful room made within Jewish liturgy for spontaneous prayer. Hoffman explains:

> Gamaliel did not...dictate the words of the Amidah as a fixed text that everyone was duty bound to recite. As late as the fourteenth century, a Spanish rabbi writes that everywhere he goes the exact wording of the Amidah varies. All the more so, it varied in Gamaliel's day, when most people did not read and when even those who did, had no prayer books in which the prayers might be written. Prayer was an oral thing in the first and second century. At most, the Rabbis shared wide-ranging agreement on the order of topics that the service should address. They had no consensus on the exact words with which the topics should be covered. This is why to this day we have different version of some prayers: two prayer for peace, for instance, one at the end of the morning Amidah (Oseh Shalom) and a different one in the evening (Shalom Rav).[48]

Gamaliel put the topics in order, but the way each individual related to the topics and to God was different. Because prayer had to be personalized, it required that the pray-er

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[47] Ibid, 2.
[48] Lawrence Hoffman, *My People's Prayer Book*, 2.

pay full attention to the themes of the liturgy and to acknowledge the need for God in all aspects of life. When prayer becomes more rote, it becomes harder to infuse the words with this kind of mindfulness.

However, our conclusion cannot be that all Jewish prayer should be spontaneous and personal. There are also important functions for fixed forms of Jewish prayer. Heinemann observes:

> It is doubtful whether the average man, absorbed as he is in the monotonous routine of daily life, would ever turn his thoughts spontaneously to God, except perhaps in times of extreme joy or distress. It is, then, the aim of fixed prayer to provide man with a stimulus to turn his thoughts to God.[49]

Heinemann is bringing up an important point based on the human condition. Fixed liturgy and having fixed time for prayer ensures that we worship God even when we may not be driven to this holy pursuit ourselves. Each person is different when it comes to how he or she summons up the right intention for prayer. Sometimes we lack the *kavanah*, creativity and effort to create our own prayers. Having the comfort of fixed wording ensures that we will never be mute before God. For others, reciting fixed words is a hindrance to finding meaning and relevance in worship. It is understandable why even the great Rabbis used biblical verses in their prayers. It is natural to look to time-tested beautiful imagery to express sentiments that feel almost inexplicable. True, there are times when we need no help to talk to God. Yet, there are times when we are thankful to have written words that have spanned generations. There is a natural fluidity between fixed and spontaneous prayer.

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[49] Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 18.

VI. What is Fixed About Spontaneous Prayer?

Heinemann teaches us a great deal when we attempt to answer the question of what is fixed about spontaneous prayer. He writes, "It has become clear in the course of our investigation that private prayer, though it lacks standard forms and norms imposed by *halacha*, still exhibits its own characteristic patterns and stylistic marks. It uses the second person in addressing God...It will usually employ the Tetragrammaton and frequently uses additional divine epithets with first person possessive suffix, such as, "My God"..."Our father."[50] He continues, "As a rule, this genre of prayer is characterized by its stylistic simplicity and its lack of formal requirements. The formulae which it uses are also simple and practical. The prayers which belong to this category usually will not be longer than a sentence or two."[51] In conclusion, he writes, "Private prayer is often formulated in the vernacular tongue and in popular idiom—and not necessarily in the quasi-literary style of the statutory prayer; for we are dealing with spontaneous folk creations. This accounts for the regular Aramaic of these prayers."[52]

Thus, Heinemann explains that spontaneous prayer can be defined and described. It uses certain grammatical forms, it addresses God in particular ways, it is simple and short since it is being formulated from the heart on the spot, and it uses conversational language. These aspects of spontaneous prayer are not taught to Jewish pray-ers. These rules for spontaneous prayer are internalized as if through osmosis by simply being present during Jewish worship and listening to prayers that are offered. Much of the way we speak to God is culturally ingrained and unconscious. However, praying in this way

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[50] Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, 190.
[51] Ibid, 190.
[52] Ibid., 190.

was probably conscious and purposeful for the Rabbis of the Talmud, who wanted to distinguish it from what was becoming statutory prayer which was fixed and required.

It is doubtful that Jews have ever stopped the practice of crying out to God in personal moments. Indeed, this act of prayer may not even be defined or recognized by the Jew as prayer. As well, the words, structure and imagery employed are most likely not conscious. Personal prayer of this kind fits well with a Jewish theology that believes God is immanent and acts in history. This kind of prayer grows out of the Bible, and is particularly natural. Perhaps by teaching Jews the history of this kind of personal prayer and sharing a language with which to think about personal prayer, these moments will become more conscious and even more religious.

VII. Another Example of Rabbinic Spontaneous Prayer

The Amidah is not the only Jewish prayer with spontaneous roots. Lee and others have pointed to another genre of rabbinic prayer as also being filled with a highly personal flavor. *Beit Hamidrash* prayers were prayers spoken in the House of Study during the rabbinic period. Many prayers of the Talmud have been labeled as *Beit Hamidrash* prayers. Lee writes:

> Prayers which come from the Bet Hamidrash are spontaneous prayers which arise out of the context of the study and exposition of Torah. In the Study House, it was a natural phenomenon for students and scholars to open and close their Scriptural studies with words of praise to God.[53]

Lee notes that originally these prayers were spontaneous. They were not meant to be repeated. Yet, over time, certain forms of language became accepted and were often used. It must have been difficult to compose radically different prayers at the close of

[53] Barton Lee, "The Private Prayers of the Rabbis", 71

each study session. The same sentiments were probably felt day after day and the prayers came to sound similar. It is not surprising that prayers used in the *Beit Hamidrash* began to take on a uniform flavor. These prayers were mainly aimed at praising God for giving the Torah and made requests for the consolation and redemption of Israel. They often use third-person to refer to God (May it be the will of the Holy One).[54]

An interesting dilemma arose in these *Beit Hamidrash* prayers that didn't occur during times of other personal prayer. When praying privately during the Amidah, the prayer is silent and there is no need for anybody else to affirm the words with "*Amen.*" However, "the *Bet Ha Midrash* prayers were uttered in public, and, within the context of the exposition, the conclusion point was uncertain to the congregation. In order to evoke the proper response at the proper time, the rabbis concluded the prayer at the end of the derasha with the words, "*V'nomar Amen*" and let us say *Amen* or *V'imru Amen*, "And you say *Amen.*"[55] Thus, a formalized ending had to be inserted into the spontaneous prayers in the study house so that the pray-er could make sure that the students knew when he was finished. The problem that pray-ers in the Study House experienced some two thousand years ago is a problem clergy still face today. Prayer leaders in a communal setting often have to say, "And let us say *Amen*..." to cue the congregation that the ending of the prayer has come. This is also a way to bring passive listeners of a prayer into the active deed of praying by affirming that the words spoken were heard and the sentiments shared.

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[54] Ibid. 76.
[55] Ibid. 76.

VIII. Blessings for Various Occasions

Another genre of rabbinic prayer that blurs the line between spontaneity and fixity are blessings for various occasions. In *Mishna Berakhot* chapter 9 and further expounded in the Talmud, we find the exact wording that one is to use when encountering unusual experiences in life. For instance, "one who sees the site where miracles were wrought for Israel says, 'Blessed be He who performed miracles for our fathers in this place.'"[56] There is fixed wording for seeing earthquakes, lightning, thunder, tempests and on hearing bad news and good news. These blessings for various occasions can be found at the back of the *Siddur.*[57]

One would think that observing a miracle, reveling in the beauty of creation and being confronted by important news would all be wonderful occasions for a person to automatically call out to God in spontaneous prayer. In fact, we naturally do this. We say, "Oh my God..." when something extraordinary happens. However, the Rabbis channeled the natural spontaneous prayer-response of the individual by prescribing exact words to say on these occasions, thereby curtailing, to some extent, the spontaneity. While it is easy to see that there would necessarily be a highly spontaneous quality to saying any of the blessings, the prescribed wording nonetheless adds a layer of fixity and a sense of being rote and mechanical to a moment that could be individual, fluid, and free.

Perhaps this is a clue as to why many Jews feel awkward spontaneously praying aloud. Although the Rabbis encouraged free expression of the heart before God, they

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[56] Ed., Pinhas Kehati, *Mishna Berakhot*, (Jerusalem: Maor Wallach Press), 102.
[57] See *The Daily Prayer Book Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* translated and annotated by Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company: 1949), 774-786.

also wrote down the words to use in the majority of liturgical moments. Therefore, although traditional Jews may quietly utter individual prayers to God during the Amidah for instance, the *berakhot* for various occasions that arise in the day are so engrained and internalized that they become automatic. The prayers to be said upon awakening, before and after eating and after using the bathroom come out of the lips of traditional Jews as easily as breathing. Deviation from the wording would seem bizarre, while infusing the words with *kavannah* remains important. Thus, there is still a spontaneous aspect to reciting *berakhot* throughout the day, and it is precisely being aware when saying a blessing that makes it spiritual and reminds us of God.

Liberal Jews who are not familiar with the blessings for various occasions may be more apt to just call out to God in wonder or pain upon encountering an unusual and powerful experience. Or, they may just say, "Wow" which means, "This is awesome," but they do not have a prayer vocabulary with which to utilize on the spot. There should be a balance between using traditional and personal words to mark a moment and express one's own sentiments. Using traditional names for God and the blessing formula grounds a prayer in Judaism. This alone may bring comfort and a sense of authenticity to the pray-er. Although just marveling at the moment, with or without words, may also feel particularly holy to the person who is not familiar with Jewish liturgical language.

IX. Conclusion

For the Rabbis, prayer that was highly personal and eloquent was ideal prayer. However, they understood human nature very well. Thus, they instituted norms and rubrics into Jewish liturgy which would guide the worship service until today. Humans

need structure and wording when praying daily so that the service flows and so that it is predictable and can be taught and transmitted. As well, community is built when people say the same words in the same order in every community around the world. Jews are a people, and our liturgy contributes to this phenomenon. The Rabbis did not want prayer to become robotic or rote, with the words losing their meaning and the act becoming mindless and meaningless. Prayer should not be a task to complete. The rabbis spoke of *kavanah* and of infusing prayer with a personal intention and mindfulness even when reciting the same words day in and day out. As we have seen, the Amidah, the core part of the liturgy, has built within its form avenues for spontaneous and private prayer. The silent Amidah serves this purpose and, within the nineteen benedictions, there are openings for adding personal touches.

The Rabbis are our models for bringing God into the communal endeavors of our lives, such as during a study session. Still today, it would be a meaningful pursuit to offer a prayer before and or after a class. The same themes in the Rabbis' prayers would be appropriate today. It would still make sense to acknowledge God as the Source of the Torah and the Source of the blessing of health which enables us to study. Hope that the values learned in study would be carried into the world could be concretized through prayer. Many Jews do begin a study session with the prayer "...*La'asok b'divrei Torah.*" The key is to figure out how to infuse this one-line, often memorized prayer with personal intention. This was the challenge the Rabbis faced and tried to address.

More and more rabbis are using the Amidah in creative ways in their worship services. Often just the themes or titles of each of the benedictions as well as the

chatimot are written on a *daf tefillah*. Congregants are encouraged to pray personal words to God based on these themes. In this way, the silent time of the Amidah can have profoundly personal meaning. Some prayer leaders encourage pray-ers to focus on one or two of the benedictions on a given day that seem especially relevant. The Amidah fuses private and communal prayer in a magnificent way.

There is no doubt that biblical prayer had an enormous impact on the psyche of the Rabbis. They believed that it was appropriate and necessary to call out to God in times of joy and times of stress. Although we credit the rabbinic period with setting down many of our prayers, we should not forget the rabbinic model of private prayer as well.

Chapter 3: Spontaneous Jewish Prayer from the Middle Ages to Modernity

I. Piyyutim

As late as the 6th century, even though the obligatory Jewish statutory prayers were fixed, the prayer service was not sealed off from innovations and changes in liturgy. Even after the *halacha* was set, describing the rules and structures for daily Jewish prayer, the prayer service and the wording of the prayers were not immutably fixed. The service was spoken and recited, not read from a book. The prayers were relatively short, easy to memorize and the liturgy not fixed completely word for word. In terms of our discussion of spontaneous Jewish prayer, this period in communal prayer was characterized by relative flexibility, variety of wording from community to community, and great subjective freedom of the prayer leader to infuse specific emotion and timeliness into the service.[1]

New prayers were added to the service as occasions in time prompted the need and desire to mark the occasion through prayer. These kinds of prayers and poems that continued to make their way into the prayer service throughout the Middle Ages were not spontaneously composed during worship. However, they were written because of an experience that beckoned the composer to set out to write a prayer. Often these kinds of prayers were based on calling out to God to hear the suffering of God's children during this period of Crusades, the murdering of Jews and Jewish martyrdom. In this way, their spirit was highly spontaneous. However, the image and language of the prayers could be formulaic, or at least based on precedent. These new poetic additions to the liturgy are

[1] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 1993), 272.

called *piyyutim. Piyyutim* are creative, poetic insertions, often based on the statutory prayers, and often meant to fit into the structure of the prayer service.

As it became more and more popular to write and hear *piyyutim* during worship, they began to be composed about any subject that had touched the poet's personal life in a profound way. Elbogen writes, "Poetry did not limit itself to the needs and experiences of the community; the events of the life of the individual also became its subject— births, marriages, and the death of members of the community all made their contribution to the development of the liturgy."[2]

> The *paytanim*, liturgical poets, were generally cantors. On every Sabbath and festival, they surprised their congregations with new compositions which elaborated on the subjects of the biblical lection or the specific theme of the holy day. Many communities boasted their own 'house poets' and, consequently, their own anthologies of prayers in verse and rhythmical prose.[3]

It is not hard to reason that *piyyutim* were such a welcome addition to the prayer service because they added a layer of creativity and variety to the stock prayers. They spoke of contemporary issues and of timeless human emotions. While there were *halachic* regulations regarding the statutory prayers, *piyyutim* were entirely flexible. "The poetry's main power resided in its flexibility; one of the chief reasons for its popularity was that it could be continually renewed...the *piyyut* lent the entire service great flexibility, introducing a desirable interpretation in the constantly recurring, never-changing statutory prayers."[4]

Because some of these poems were written to mark either specific one-time events or occasional events, their language had to be at least in part personal and particular. However, these poems were not pieces of secular literature in which one's

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[2] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 225
[3] T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York: Penguin Books: 1981), 14.
[4] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 225-226

vocabulary was immense. They were liturgical poems that had to fit within the prayer rubric. Their language had to feel and sound "prayer-ful." Jewish prayer language comes largely from the Bible. Thus, the poet had to use biblical language in creative ways.

> The poets created their own language. They attempted to follow biblical language as much as possible...but the biblical vocabulary was hardly adequate, for they had thoughts and concepts to express that were not current earlier; those indispensable artistic forms, acrostic and rhyme, severely limited the choice of words and greatly influenced the difficulty of expression. Thus, the poets were forced to reach beyond the inherited linguistic material and take recourse in linguistic innovations.[5]

The poets' use of newly created words and terms added a spontaneous quality to the liturgy. It was clear to all listening that the liturgy could be adapted to respond to every new situation in life.

Maybe it was because the Middle Ages were such a tumultuous time in the life of Jews that liturgical poetry was so prolific. However, this is not the only reason *piyyutim* were so popular at this time. It should not be forgotten that they served to aesthetically enhance the liturgy and added "entertainment value" and true creativity to the structured prayer service.[6] Until about 1150, new material was constantly being written. The prayer leader was the only one in the congregation who had the collection of *piyyutim* from which to read during the service. This also added a spontaneous quality to the preparation for the service and the actual prayer experience. The prayer leader would perhaps think about the emotion in the *kahal* that day, about events of the week, or about a theme that he wanted to explore. *Piyyutim* could be added to aid in these goals.[7] The

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[5] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 231
[6] Idea taken from Dr. Richard Sarason
[7] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 280.

piyyut truly opened a new period in the development of the liturgy. "For more than a thousand years the prevailing opinion was that this embellishment of the service was pleasurable."[8]

Poetic insertions make timely our timeless liturgy. At its core, this is what spontaneous prayer accomplishes. The *piyyutim* recited on the High Holidays especially meet this need among worshippers. There is perhaps no other *piyyut* as well known and as powerful as *Unetanah Tokef* which is traditionally chanted prior to the *Musaf Kedushah* on both days of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur. The author of this *piyyut* is unknown. As Reuven Hammer has suggested, the *piyyut's* language and structure suggest that it was written in the Byzantine period. The fact that it appears among the manuscript of the Cairo Geniza also suggests an early date.

The text of this *piyyut* is as follows:

We shall ascribe holiness to this day,
For it is awesome and terrible.
Your kingship is exalted upon it.
Your throne is established in mercy.
You are enthroned upon it in truth.
In truth You are the judge,
The exhorter, the all-knowing, the witness,
He who inscribes and seals,
Remembering all that is forgotten.
You open the book of remembrance

[8] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 219

Which proclaims itself,

And the seal of each person is there.

The great shofar is sounded,

A still small voice is heard.

The angels are dismayed,

They are seized by fear and trembling

As they proclaim: Behold the Day of Judgment!

For all the hosts of heaven are brought for judgment.

They shall not be guiltless in Your eyes

And all creatures shall parade before You as a troop.

As a shepherd herds his flock,

Causing his sheep to pass beneath his staff,

So do You cause to pass, count, and record,

Visiting the souls of all living,

Decreeing the length of their days,

Inscribing their judgment.

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,

And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,

Who shall live and who shall die,

Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not,

Who shall perish by water and who by fire,

Who by sword and who by wild beast,

Who by famine and who by thirst,

Who by earthquake and who by plague,

Who by strangulation and who by stoning,

Who shall have rest and who shall wander,

Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued,

Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented,

Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low,

Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished.

But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree.

> For Your praise is in accordance with Your name. You are difficult to anger and easy to appease. For You do not desire the death of the condemned, but that he turn from his path and live. Until the day of his death You wait for him. Should he turn, You will receive him at once. In truth You are their Creator and You understand their inclination, for they are but flesh and blood. The origin of man is dust, his end is dust. He earns his bread by exertion and is like a broken shard, like dry grass, a withered flower, like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that blows away and dust that scatters, like a dream that flies away. But You are King, God who lives for all eternity! There is no limit to Your years, no end to the length of Your days, no measure to the hosts of Your glory, no understanding the meaning of Your Name. Your Name is fitting unto You and You are fitting unto it, and our name has been called by Your Name. Act for the sake of Your Name and sanctify Your Name through those who sanctity Your Name.[9]

These words lead directly into the *Kedushah,* the prayer of the sanctification of God's name. This *piyyut* was the impetus for the famous Ashkenazic legend about Rabbi Amnon of Mainz who lived in the 11th century. He did not give up his faith, and for this he was brutally tortured. Eventually, in synagogue he died after reciting this *piyyut.* As Hammer writes, "Moving as this legend is, it should not distract us from the *piyyut* itself,

[9] Translation by Reuven Hammer, See:
http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Rosh_Hashana/Overview_Rosh_Hashanah_Community/RH_Services/RH_Liturgical_themes_531/Unetanah_1142.htm

the subject of which is not martyrdom, but human responsibility and the possibility for change, as we face the judgment of our creator."[10]

A *Piyyut* both captures the moment in time in which it was written and expresses human sentiments which cross all time. With the invention of printing, the same *piyyutim* became standard in a whole array of prayer books, making them not seem wholly different from age-old liturgy to most congregants. What the *piyyut* continues to remind us of, though, is that Judaism is open to liturgical innovation and new poetry should be regularly written and added to enhance the prayer experience for worshippers today. Many Jewish poets today are writing *piyyutim* which presumably capture the language and sentiments of contemporary worshippers against the backdrop of traditional liturgy. For instance, Rabbi Jack Riemer has written a new version of *Unetaneh Tokef* called "Hard Questions":

Let us ask ourselves hard questions
For this is the time for truth.

How much time did we waste
In the year that is now gone?

Did we fill our days with life
Or were they dull and empty?

Was there love inside our home
Or was the affectionate word left unsaid?

Was there a real companionship with our children
Or was there a living together and a growing apart?

Were we a help to our mates
Or did we take them for granted?

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[10] Reuven Hammer, http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Rosh_Hashana/Overview_Rosh_Hashanah_Community/RH_Services/RH_Liturgical_themes_531/Unetanah_1142.htm

How was it with our friends:
Were we there when they needed us or not?

The kind deed: did we perform it or postpone it?
The unnecessary gibe: did we say it or hold it back?

Did we live by false values?
Did we deceive others?
Did we deceive ourselves?

Were we sensitive to the rights and feelings
Of those who worked for us?

Did we acquire only possessions
Or did we acquire new insights as well?

Did we fear what the crowd would say
And keep quiet when we should have spoken out?

Did we mind only our own business
Or did we feel the heartbreak of others?

Did we live right,
And if not,
Then have we learned, and will we change?[11]

Riemer's language is modern. His *piyyut* speaks powerfully and easily to a modern congregation. His themes are the same ones found in the original *Unetaneh Tokef*; sin and regret, *teshuvah* and change. His *piyyut* captures the essence of our time in which families are stressed, people are busy, and life so readily becomes self-absorbed. He urges us to re-evaluate and re-prioritize.

Here is another modern *piyyut* also modeled after *Unetaneh Tokef*:

In my great loneliness, loneliness of a wounded animal

Hour on hour I lie, keep silence.

Fate has gleaned my vineyard, left not a grape behind

[11] Jack Riemer, ed., *New Perspectives for the High Holy Days* (New York: Media Judaica, 1970), 32.

But the heart, subdued has forgiven.

If these are the last of my days

Le me be calm

Lest I cloud with my bitterness the calm blue

Of the sky-my companion of old.[12]

Rachel Bluwstein writes this modern *piyyut* to help people who have suffered tragedies "forgive life." She writes in the age-old spirit of the *piyyutim*—to capture the essence of her experiences and to set the words within a Jewish context. For a worshipper who had a year of suffering, solace can be found in saying Rachel Bluwstein's words. No doubt these words would be infused with the spontaneous emotion the worshipper would conjure up as he or she recited this *piyyut.*

II. Mysticism

The *piyyutim* spoke to their age and time. They created a "counterbalance to the fixed mass of the statutory prayers."[13] Likewise, Jewish mystics and other pietists added their own liturgical innovations to the service to add meaning and relevance. We can think of *kabbalistic* liturgical innovations as being wholly spontaneous in that the mystics spoke about the need for prayer to always be infused with intention. The mystics built upon the rabbinic mindset which was that, "Despite its ritualized nature, prayer was to be carried out as a matter of personal piety, entailing inwardness and concentration, not to

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[12] Poem by Rachel Bluwstein printed in "With Sweetness from the Rock: A Jewish Spiritual Companion for Care-givers" by Rabbi Stephanie Dickstein, LMSW Spiritual Care Coordinator, Shira Ruskay Canter/JBFCS, New York- http://www.huc.edu/kalsman/articles/StephanieDicksteinCaregivers.pdf

[13]Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 234

mention a certain degree of spontaneity."[14] The *kabbalistic* attempts at *unio mystica* (unifying oneself and God) and *devekut* (cleaving to God), of course involved spontaneous prayer. Ecstatic worship involves crying out to God, weeping, bodily movement and much spontaneous emotion. As Bahya ibn Pakuda wrote in *Hovot Halevavot,* "A prayer without inner devotion is like a body without a soul."[15]

The mystics understood that the first obligation of the worshipper is for *kavanah* (devotion in prayer).

> Every conscious innovation and change in the liturgy that occurred...flowed from the desire to intensify and deepen the heart...Only when prayer becomes routine, when prescribed prayers are instituted to be recited at specific times, does the possibility arise that they will become a formality...It was the task of religious instruction to fight the formalization of the liturgy with every possible means...The admonitions of the prophets and the psalmists against the formalization of the liturgy echoes throughout the rabbinic literature... [16]

Mystics taught throughout the Middle Ages that "true prayer is the ascent of the soul to God, [and] one can only pray properly in a state of ecstasy."[17]

Given what has been said about the mystics' main concern of infusing personal intention and concentration into prayer, one could think that the written word was less important to them than the emotion of the moment. However, the mystics believed that every word and letter profoundly mattered. Thus, mystics paid intense attention to follow the written prayer service impeccably. As Elbogen postulates, "In such a tumultuous period as the expulsion from Spain, having prescribed wording and manner of prayer was

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[14] Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2003), 220.
[15] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 285 quoting from Bahya Ibn Pakuda in *Hovot Halevavot*
[16] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 286
[17] Ibid, 289.

comforting."[18] It was comforting and no doubt provided a level of control to have a prescription for how to cleave to God and bring about change in the world. The mystics believed that it was only with precise recital of the prayers that they had a theurgic effect on God. Numerology and Gematria[19] were also used as ways to reach and impact God. The mystics performed prayers to the letter of the *halacha* while simultaneously infusing their words and mantras with personal intention.

The scholar and mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria taught about infusing the written word with *kavanah*. He lived in the 1500s, and was the founder of one of the most important branches of *Kabbalah*, often referred to as Lurianic *Kabbalah*. His students reported that out of Luria's desire to show humility, fear and reverence for God, he would almost always pray silently or in whisper. "...There was a conviction that the sound of a voice...can disturb the communion between...the individual's soul and God, produced only by the power of *inner*, heartfelt desire."[20] Like the Rabbis of the Talmud, for whom Hannah's silent prayer was the model for the Amidah, silent devotion for Luira allowed for intense emotion directed toward God.

In addition to silently mouthing the words of prayer so as not to become precoccupied with one's own voice, weeping was a central characteristic of Lurianic prayer. The Zohar teaches this point: "He who prays and weeps and cries so much that there is no feeling left in his lips—that is perfect prayer, prayer in the heart, and it never returns empty."[21] Emotion was to be infused into every word of prayer whether in the synagogue or in private. Luris stressed both communal worship and private prayer. He

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[18] Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 291
[19] Using the Hebrew alphabet as a numerological system so as to derive hidden meaning from Scripture
[20] Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 228. See also Isaiah Tishby and Fischel Lachower, eds., *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 2; 271-272.
[21] Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 228.

taught that "there are different heavenly gates through which prayer passes, and that one's individual prayer was not exactly the same as another's."[22]

For Luria, "every utterance in prayer, has, besides its literal meaning, a profound mystical meaning; one who recited a prayer without devotion, or who desecrates it with impure thoughts, delays the time of redemption. Therefore, special *kavanot,* prayers of intention, were devised."[23] Lurianic *kavanot* often involved combining the various forms of the Tetragrammaton found in the pages of the prayer book. The *kavanot* were recited in order to bring about change in God:

> Since, in the *Kabbalah*, it is man who can affect the cosmic processes by his deeds and thoughts, it follows that if man has these divine names and their combinations in mind when he prays he performs the tremendous task of sending upwards those impulses which help to promote greater harmony in the Sefirotic[24] realm, and by so doing he succeeds in bringing down the resulting flow of divine grace and blessing.[25]

As Pinchas Giller writes, "The central premise of the practice of *kavanot* is that the adept's contemplative mind is the agent of theurgic change."[26] The mystics were highly concerned with infusing a spontaneous quality into every breath uttered in prayer because they believed that their words unified them and God in an act of *tikkun,* repair. Their vehicle to reach God was the spoken word.

Many *kabbalistic* prayers are now mainstays of our *Kabbalat Shabbat* liturgy. Some of these prayers were written before Luria came to Safed. Luria and his followers would go outside to welcome Shabbat. Luria recited verses from *Lecha Dodi* and Psalms

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[22] Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 235. Luria taught that there were twelve gates though which prayer passed corresponding to the twelve tribes.

[23] Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser: 1982), 284

[24] 10 emanations from the Godhead.

[25] Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (New York: Schocken Books: 1973), 36.

[26] Pinchas Giller, "Between Poland and Jerusalem: Kabbalistic Prayer in Early Modernity," *Modern Judaism,* 24, 3 (2004), 226.

in a precise way and prescribed to his followers how many times to utter which lines and in which order.[27] Fine writes that it would have been difficult for a worshipper to incorporate all of the details Luria is said to have taught during one's prayer.[28] For Luria and the mystics, prayer was to be regimented and yet highly spontaneous. "In short, praying with the Lurianic *kavanot* could not have been an easy job. It would have required, at the very least, a superb memory, the ability to cope successfully with the constant distractions to which worshippers are always vulnerable, and steadfast concentration to sustain prayer of such a complex and intense nature."[29]

III. Hasidic Prayer

As per our brief discussion of mystical prayer in the Middle Ages, Hasidic prayer is also concerned primarily with the notion of *kavanah*. And, like *kabbalistic* prayer, volumes have been written about Hasidic prayer. In terms of our discussion of spontaneous prayer, we are most interested in the Hasidic idea of *kavanah*. As we have said, praying with *kavanah* means to infuse personal intention and concentration into prayer rather than mechanically saying the words in order to fulfill the *mitzvah*. *Kavannah* is a way to add spontaneity to one's prayers. Hasidism stresses the importance of forcefully, mindfully, and joyfully infusing prayer with intention.

There is a famous Hasidic text in which the Baal Shem Tov[30], the founder of the movement, has a dialogue with his soul.

> The soul declared to the rabbi, may his memory be for a blessing for the life of the world to come, that the reason why the supernal matters were revealed to him was not because he had studied many Talmudic tractates and Codes of Law but

[27] Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul*, 249.
[28] Ibid. 258.
[29] Ibid. 258.
[30] Israel Baal Shem Tov lived in Eastern Europe in the 1700s and is considered the founder of Hasidisim.

> because of his prayer. For at all times he recited his prayers with great concentration. It was a result of this that he attained to an elevated state.[31]

Concentration or *kavanah* in prayer is a central goal of the Hasidic life. However, Hasidism even go beyond infusing written prayer with intention. In a nutshell, "Hasidic prayer is essentially ecstatic."[32]

A Hasidic teaching is told about how even King David prayed with ecstatic emotion, weeping into the night. The story is relayed by Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was the leader of the Bratslaver Hasidim. His writings are still used today by Jews seeking to infuse their prayer with intentionality. He is said to have taught:

> The main time that King David would meditate upon God was at night, under the covers in bed. Hidden from the sight of all others, he would pour out his heart before God. He therefore said, "I meditate every night on my bed in tears." (Psalm 6:7).[33]

Rabbi Nachman also said that one can create a special room under the *Tallit*. "Just drape your *Tallit* over your eyes and express your thoughts to God as you desire. You can also converse with God while sitting before an open book. Let others think that you are merely reading."[34]

These teachings demonstrate that Hasidic prayer is about cleaving to God. This is done through spiritually leaving this world. Although the Rabbi Nachman quotations are pithy and inspiring, this process in Hasidic prayer is complex and a vast body of literature

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[31] Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, 17.
[32] Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, "Hasidic Sources in Heschel's Conception of Prayer", *Conservative Judaism*, 50, 2-3, 1998, 37.

[33] Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 292 quoting from *Sichot HaRan* 47

[34] Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 292.

has been written about it. In addition, the various Hassidic sects differ from each other often with regard to meditative practices. How then can we, in a short survey, best go about capturing the essence of the spontaneous quality in Hasidic prayer? We will look to the eloquent writings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.[35] His notion of prayer was highly influenced by Hasidic teachings.

IV. From a Hasidic Point of View, Why is Attaining *Kavanah* So Difficult?

In his discussions of prayer, Heschel often emphasized the Hasidic way. Heschel was convinced that the Baal Shem Tov had brought new revelations to the Jewish world. Heschel wrote, "Many Jews talked about God, but it was the Besht[36] who brought God to the people."[37] In Heschel's article, "On Payer" he describes how we can bring God down to us during prayer. We must forget ourselves and become aware of God. This is the practice of annihilation of the ego and losing oneself in God.[38] "Thus in beseeching Him for bread, there is one instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger not to food, but to His mercy. This instant is prayer."[39] Given this criterion for true prayer, I ask myself if I have ever prayed.

If this is the ideal in prayer, it is a clue for us into the mystery of spontaneous Jewish prayer. Jews, like all other human beings, spontaneously pray to God from the pits of our souls. In this way, spontaneous prayer starts as completely self-centered. We are concerned with our needs, our wants, and whether God will hear us and answer us.

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[35] Heschel was one of the most significant theologians of the 20th century.
[36] "The Besht" is an acronym for Baal Shem Tov (Master of a Good Name)
[37] Rivka Horwitz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel on Prayer and His Hasidic Sources," *Modern Judaism*, 19, 3, 1999, 295.
[38] The Hasidic term for this is *bittul ha-yesh*
[39] Rivka Horwitz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel," 296.

Perhaps the reason this kind of prayer feels so foreign to many Jews or so problematic is because, at least according to Hasidic thought, it is not true prayer. It may feel good and natural at first, but upon any deeper reflection may feel irrational or absurd. Ultimately, this kind of "prayer" separates us from God by distinguishing our egos from God. According to Hasidic teachings, true prayer may begin with the self, but it should end by being fully consumed with God. "The goal of prayer is not that we should be answered but to teach us that there is nobody in the whole world worthy of praying to, except He blessed be He."[40] Thus, it may feel good at first to cry out to God for our own needs. But, in the end, it may feel more spiritually authentic or fulfilling to move out of ourselves in order to see the world from the viewpoint of God. Then, our needs and God's desires are joined as one and our prays are said on behalf of God.

Heschel helps us pinpoint another reason that spontaneous Jewish prayer and/or prayer infused with intention can be so difficult, embarrassing and awkward for Jews. Jews understand the incredible power of words. Words are intrinsic to our religion. If a Jew takes seriously the words that are to come from his or her lips and believes that their dialogue partner is God, then the person cannot be filled with anything but awe and fear.[41] How do we overcome or deal with this awe and fear? *Derech Hasidim,* based on talmudic teachings, suggests that a person should not speak to anyone before prayer. He should concentrate on coming before God. Hasidic prayer requires preparation for prayer. It requires the pray-er to focus his or her thoughts solely on reaching out to God.

If we are to take this Hasidic teaching to heart, then as rabbis and prayer leaders we must ask ourselves if we are suggesting ways for our congregants to prepare to really

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[40] Rivka Horwitz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel," 297. Quoting from Rabbi Moshe of Trani
[41] Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, "Hasidic Sources in Heschel's Conception of Prayer," 40.

pray? Does an opening song or a short *iyyun* prepare us and our congregants for worship? I tend to think not.

V. Infusing Prayer with Empathy

Whereas the Kabbalists used *kavanot* to help them cleave to God in prayer, Hasidism focused on each letter of each word in the prayerbook. This concerns the first level of Hasidic prayer. The pray-er thinks about each letter of the word and then about the meaning of the whole word being uttered. The pray-er tries to empathize with the sentiments in the worship service. Sympathy is based on having the same feeling as someone else. Empathy is based on intellectually identifying with the thoughts, feelings or attitudes of someone else. Heschel believed that prayer can be seen as an act of empathy.[42] This kind of prayer can lead to devotion with intention. Heschel, using a Hasidic teaching, acknowledged that "there are times when the love for God burns so powerfully within your heart that the words of prayer seem to rush forth, quickly and without deliberation." But, there are times when a pray-er should read the words from a prayerbook to help him or her come to devotion with intention.[43] Thinking about the significance of what is being said automatically infuses prayer with a highly spontaneous quality since each pray-er is relying on his or her experiences and emotions to make prayer meaningful. As a Hasidic text says, "Even if you are not aroused as your prayer begins, give close attention to the words you speak. As you grow in strength and God

[42] Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, "Hasidic Sources in Heschel's Conception of Prayer," 43. See Heschel, *Quest for God,* p. 28. See also Rivka Horwitz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel", 300.
[43] Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, "Hasidic Sources in Heschel's Conception of Prayer," 43. See *Derech Hasidim*, p 133:44.

helps you to draw near, you can even say the words more quickly and remain in His presence."[44]

There are several hurdles to attempting prayer in this way. First of all, the pray-er has to understand the words in the prayerbook. If Hebrew is foreign, this could pose a problem in this pursuit. Another issue is that the language of worship has to be able to be understood and digested either literally or metaphorically, but it cannot express wholly unknown sentiments or ideas out of synch with one's experiences and beliefs. There has to be an element of faith when praying, an element beyond rationality and proof. But, in order to feel empathy with the prayers and with the community reciting the prayers, the liturgy has to be accessible. With this being said, focusing on the written word is only an initial step in Hasidic prayer. Ultimately, Hasidic masters are able to move beyond the words on the page.[45] The Ba'al Shem Tov and other Hasidic leaders favored "moving beyond" Lurianic *kavanot* as a way to awaken the Divine.[46] They criticized extra prayers and mantras, thought by the mystics to be a key to open the gate of God, as too limited. Worship had to go beyond words on a page. As the Baal Shem Tov said, "It is a miracle that a man survives the hour of daily worship."[47] Hasidic prayer in its highest form removes one from the prayerbook, from the realm of the here and now into the realm of God.

For Heschel, spontaneous prayer was really the goal. However, Heschel would never suggest the abandonment of the structured prayer service. He reminds us of the

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[44] Tsava'at Rivash, 4a-b.
[45] Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, "Hasidic Sources in Heschel's Conception of Prayer," 44.
[46] Pinchas Giller, "Between Poland and Jerusalem," 231.
[47] Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, "Hasidic Sources in Heschel's Conception of Prayer," 37.

importance of a balance between *keva* and *kavanah*. He cites a story that demonstrates this:

> There was a rabbi of Rizhin who was a watchmaker. He came to a small town where none of the clocks told time accurately. The only ones he could repair, however, were those that were still running, not the ones which had already rusted and stopped.[48]

Sometimes it is the written word that prompts the prayers of our heart. Sometimes our heart longs for prayer, and it is the traditional service that inspires the words to form on our lips. Heschel did not want to see a Judaism in which rigidity and decorum displaced intention. He wrote, "If we were alive today, the Kotzker[49] would look aghast at the replacement of spirituality by aesthetics, spontaneity by decorum."[50] Heschel and Hasidism teach us much about the endeavor of spontaneous prayer.

VI. Tkhines

As we have said, even after the Talmud and rabbinic codes were written and the *halacha* for statutory prayers was set, many groups within Judaism up until today have infused their own approach to spirituality into the standard Jewish litrugy. From *paytanim* to Kabbalists to the Hasidim, Jewish liturgy has expanded in meaning and scope over the centuries. Not suprisingly, women have added their own voices to Jewish prayer.

Tkhines (Hebrew for penitential prayers, supplications), date from the 17th century. They are Yiddish-language prayers meant to be read by Ashkenazic Jewish women who, unlike the men of the time, typically could not read Hebrew, the language of

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[48] Rivka Horwitz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel," 299 citing *Man's Quest p. 37*
[49] Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotzk, better known as the Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859) was a Hasidic leader.
[50] Rivka Horwitz, "Abraham Joshua Heschel," 304. See also Heschel, *Passion for Truth*, p. 320.

the established synagogue prayer book. Many of these prayers were authored by women for other women who would read them at times and occasions pertinent to Jewish women's lives. There are *tkhines* for lighting Sabbath candles, giving birth, dealing with a sick child, etc. The *tkhines* were the voice that women used to approach God and to serve God.

Several volumes have recently been published acting as a window into the religious lives of Jewish women in *shtetl* Europe. Tracy Guren Klirs offers side-by-side Yiddish originals with English translations and comments about a range of *tkhines* in her book, *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayers.* She writes that Jewish women have prayed throughout all of history whether we have their records or not. Klirs reiterates a point we have made: although the Bible portrays women as spontaneously praying words of poetry, not everyone has the talent to use language in this way. Most worshippers rely on the written word in the prayerbook.

The *tkhines* "represent the creative outpourings of the feminine spirit at a time when Jewish women's lives were severely circumscribed and their participation in the religious life of the community even more restricted...They read themselves into the pages of their *tkhines*."[51] Thus, although women read prayers that others has authored, the personal and specific sentiment in the prayers allowed for spontaneous emotion to easily be infused into reciting words that resonated so strongly. As is the case in both *kabbalistic* and Hasidic prayer, *kavanah,* or in Yiddish, *kavone,* played a major part in the believed efficacy of the prayers. Many of the *tkhines* remind the pray-er to infuse the words with *kavone.* For instance in the "*Tkhine* of Three Gates," Rebetsn Sorem, daughter of Rabbi Mordkhe, writes, "...Lord of the whole world, I place my prayer

[51] Tracy Guren Klirs, *The Merit of Our Mothers* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press: 1992), 10.

before You as I begin to prepare my second new and beautiful *tkhine* with complete *kavone* and from the depths of my heart."[52]

Another recent resource making the *tkhines* accessible to the modern reader is Chava Weissler's book *Voices of the Matriarchs*. She writes:

> *Tkhines*...were in the vernacular Yiddish and were voluntary and flexible, recited when the women wished, most typically at home. They were almost always phrased in the singular, and often had space for the petitioner to insert her own name, thus making them a very personal address to God...[The world of the *tkhines*] is a world structured not only by the communal events of the Jewish calendar but also by the private events of a woman's domestic life.[53]

The *tkhines* are an incredibly useful model for modern pray-ers to investigate when attempting to write new prayers to God. They are prayers about new occasions in life that older liturgy did not address. They also represent modern and relevant prayer additions for regimented and typical religious rituals. Thus, whether we want to write a prayer or say a prayer for an occasion that is not already marked by standard liturgy, or whether we want to infuse our religious practice with relevant language, the *tkhines* are useful to help us begin our pursuit. They use biblical imagery and language and names for God that are most connected with what is needed in the prayer, and they are filled with modernisms that make the prayer timely as well as timeless. They can be used by any woman, but made personal and specific.

VII. Modern Jewish Women's Prayers: Ritualwell.org

One of the best resources for modern Jewish feminist prayer is the website, www.ritualwell.org. According to the website, "Ritualwell is "the source for innovative, contemporary Jewish ritual."

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[52] Tracy Guren Klirs, *The Merit of Our Mothers*, 13.

[53] Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1998), 8-9.

The website can be searched by holidays, Shabbat, and daily life and lifecycle events. The site is filled with hundred of prayers authored by women, almost all of which have a highly spontaneous quality. The spontaneous quality can be seen in prayers that leave room to add in names of loved ones. It can be seen in the fact that many of the prayers were written during occasions and events which prompted the writer to want to call out to God in prayer. Many of the prayers are innovations and additions to older prayers and practices.

For instance, Jane Enkin wrote a program called "Soul Candles" which can be found on the website. She explains that candle-making is an old custom performed around the High Holidays. Each wick wrapped in wax gets dedicated to the soul of a loved one. Enkin writes, "I roll one rectangle of wax around a wick for my husband, in gratitude. One for my son, in fierce hope and fear. One for myself. Then I gently braid the three tapers together, and squeeze them tightly to join them. I press on a cut-out scrap of wax that suggests something to me—a flame, a tree, a heart. I've made a sturdy braided candle to keep, to use for havdalah in the coming weeks." She goes on to explain that in "Ashkenazi communities, women often surrounded their ritual actions with prayers and intentions that were filled with personal, emotional content. Sometimes the thoughts were spontaneous, although shaped by tradition." She cites a *tkhine* from Klirs' volume about candle-making.

Enkins explains that when she does her candle-making ritual, she chooses a few parts of the *tkhine* to read. She thinks of her parents' souls. She thinks about the women teachers in her life and about the women who authored the *tkhines*. When she makes the

candles, her silent and spoken prayers that accompany the ritual are highly personal, spontaneous and yet grounded in tradition. As Rav Kook said, "The old becomes new, and the new becomes holy." This could be the motto of the website.

Another article from the website entitled, "Old Symbols, New Rituals: Adapting Traditional Symbols, Ceremonies and Blessings" by Marcia Cohn Spiegel focuses on making new the ancient *kabbalistic* ceremony of inviting the *ushpizin* into the *sukkah.* The *ushpizin* are biblical guests who are invited into the *sukkah* through liturgy and ritual. Spiegel writes:

> Invite participants to invoke the qualities and character traits of the *ushpizot*[54] in addition to their names. For example, you could welcome peace, understanding, and appreciation of diversity into your sukkah.

She suggests that women organizing a sukkah ritual:

> Ask participants to call out names of *ushpizot* and other women who have been sources of shelter or protection for the Jewish community and/or individuals. Ask participants to call out the names of groups or individuals who have been wanderers in search of a resting-place (i.e. the *ushpizot*, single mothers, Jews by choice, gays and lesbians). Offer them your sukkah and your community as a welcoming, restful home. Ask participants to share who and what they want to welcome into their own lives during the coming year (rest, self-love, etc). Recite the following invocation, adapted from the traditional Aramaic blessing formally welcoming the guests to join the group in the sukkah.

This can be spoken or chanted together:

> Enter holy guests from on high; enter hallowed mothers of our people, sisters, wise women and prophets. Take your place with us under the protecting canopy of the Shechina, in this sukkah of peace. Enter Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Devorah, Avigail, Huldah, and Esther.
>
> Enter _____, _____, _____.... (INVITE PARTICIPANTS). Enter, all those whose names we don't even know, because you have been lost to us.
>
> We are ready to fulfill the ancient words which call us still, "You shall dwell in booths seven days, all who are Israelite shall dwell in booths, in order that your

[54] *Ushpizot* are biblical women who are also invited into the *sukkah* in liberal Jewish traditions.

> generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, (the land of Narrow Places)."
>
> As we welcome you today into our sukkah, may we soon welcome into our communities all women, who like you, have voices and visions and leadership much needed in our communities.
>
> Take your place, take your place, guests from on high. Take your place, take your place, hallowed guests. May we all join you in taking our own places and in making places for others under the protection of Shechina.

We can see in this elaborate ritual so many spontaneous prayer qualities. Women are invited to tell their stories in the motif of a more standardized Sukkot liturgy. That liturgy is made personal and relevant. The liturgy is almost co-opted in order to use its base to speak to modern, Jewish feminist concerns.

VIII. Conclusion

From late antiquity to modern times, Jews have sought to infuse the structured prayer service with timeliness. The use of *piyyutim* brings creativity and variety to the fixed liturgy. Still today, whether in camp settings, youth group events, special themed services in synagogue, or the recitation of *iyyunim* not found in the prayerbook, Reform Jews look with favor on using poetry to supplement the age-old written word. Writing a meditation for a certain prayer and then reciting it during worship can be an act of spontaneous prayer. The prayer leader reads the traditional prayer and is moved to pull out a certain theme or feeling evoked by that prayer. In this way, prayers become personal, relevant, and real for that moment in time.

Both *kabbalistic* and Hasidic prayers teach us much about infusing prayer with concentration and intention. Other than extemporaneously praying aloud or to oneself,

reciting the written word with *kavanah* is the other main way to infuse prayer with spontaneity. This is so important to remember, because it helps all of us who are not eloquent poets capable of composing beautiful hymns to God whenever we want to call out to God. We can read another's words and still make them our own by praying with *kavanah* rather than reciting the words mechanically. Praying with *kavanah* no doubt brings us closer to God. The Hasidic notion that petitionary prayer should ultimately be about aligning our desires with God helps us prioritize our desires and makes holy the worthy yearning of our hearts.

Feminist Jewish prayer, which has recaptured the genre of prayer at one time almost forgotten, the *tkhines*, brings us volumes of prayers which at their core are also about *kavanah*. The *tkhines* give us a Jewish model for developing prayers to address women's concerns that are not reflected in the traditional prayerbook. This idea can be extended to any Jew who has experienced something outside the bounds of traditional prayers. By using biblical imagery and liturgical expressions, Jews are able to give voice to the occasions in time they want to mark in a prayer-ful and Jewish way. Prayers written or recited in this fashion have a highly personal and spontaneous quality about them. It is not a surprise that modern feminist prayer draws heavily on the *tkhines*.

Why is it so important to highlight the spontaneous quality to Jewish prayer and to encourage Jews to take hold of our long tradition of spontaneous prayer for themselves today? Jews are still looking for ways to connect with God. Jews still experience great sorrow and suffering and immense joy and gratitude and desire ways to acknowledge these experiences Jewishly and spiritually. It is so natural to call out to God. Yet, this

act is so personal and intimate that we don't speak about it openly. By reminding ourselves that crying to God is Jewish, it gives us permission to let go, to move beyond the cerebral experience of Judaism and to give voice to our soul. As well, we have to invigorate our communal worship experience. By speaking about *kavanah* and by suggesting to worshippers that they write modern *piyyutim*, we are helping Jews today find modern meaning in timeless liturgy. We fulfill our personal need to complain, rail against God or to bless God's name. But rather than wallowing in our woes, this kind of prayer helps us move beyond ourselves, to transcend our bubbles of existence by acknowledging the Mystery of life.

Chapter 4: Embracing Spontaneous Jewish Prayer Today: Focusing on Pastoral Care

I. Introduction

Just as in ages past, modern Jews are still seeking ways to make our timeless liturgy particularly timely. Partially this can be done through bringing one's own emotion and *kavanah* to the written word in the prayer book. As well, writing creative prayers to accompany and or replace traditional prayers can bring relevance and a fresher understanding to the text. Embracing spontaneous prayer today involves helping Jews find their own voice in our liturgy. It also involves encouraging Jews to talk to God on their own, and suggesting language for such a pursuit.

There has been much published on creating new rituals and prayers to address concerns outside the bounds of traditional liturgy. While it is a worthy pursuit to write creative liturgy, we should not forget the wealth of traditional prayers that have been part of Jewish worship for centuries. There are many prayers that have built within their structure room for spontaneity and individuality. As Reform Jews, we should begin to think about how to re-incorporate a silent Amidah, the traditional Mi Shebeirach and Tachanun to name three main areas for personal prayer within communal worship.

When we speak of spontaneous prayer today, we need to focus on communal worship, private/solo prayer to God, and particularly pastoral care. A growing interest in the area of Jewish healing has given way to a relatively new field of Jewish pastoral care. Since much of pastoral care involves spontaneous prayer, it no doubt should be an important part of our discussion.

II. Using Jewish Models of Ages Past as Doorways to Spontaneous Prayer

It has become chic to use Hasidic/mystical Jewish traditions in liberal Jewish settings. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's *niggunim* are sung at Jewish camps and Kabbalat Shabbat services as a way to bring more spirituality and participation to services. What spirituality means, of course, is difficult to define and articulate. For sure, spirituality has something to do with happiness or bliss. In the midst of the daily grind, Jews are seeking meaning and purpose and a sense of inner peace as well as a feeling of being part of something larger than themselves. They are seeking balance. They are seeking to be renewed and re-invigorated by Judaism. In this context, Rabbi Niles Goldstein has just written a book called *Gonzo Judaism: A Bold Path for Renewing an Ancient Faith.*

Goldstein speaks of offering experiential, hands-on opportunities to "resuscitate" contemporary Jewish life. One of his suggestions comes from the "Hasidic mystical tradition." It is individualistic in form and focus. Goldstein suggests the practice of *hitbodedut,* which he translates as self-seclusion or self-isolation. He explains:

> In a private, preferable natural setting, we address God directly. Removed from the formal context and liturgy of the synagogue, and from the company of other people, we express to our Creator—using our own thoughts or words—whatever it is that is going on inside us. We can 'converse,' pray, plead, confess, repent, cry, meditate.[1]

After Goldstein brings together a group of people who have had some time alone in nature to talk to God, he asks them to describe their experience. He writes that everyone has a different experience—from those who wept, those who said it was an important and

[1]Rabbi Niles Goldstein, *Gonzo Judaism: A Bold Path for Renewing an Ancient Faith* (New York: St Martin's Press: 2006) 9-11.

needed release for them of built-up feelings, to those who found the exercise to be a waste of time.

Goldstein concludes:

> What on earth could be more gonzo than standing toe-to-toe with God and laying it all on the line—or wandering through the woods talking, crying, shouting, laughing, and swearing? Best of all, we can practice *hitbodedut* spontaneously and independently, anytime, anywhere, and with absolutely no prerequisites.[2]

By referring back to the *kabbalistic* practice of *hitbodedut*, Goldstein looks to Jewish tradition to provide avenues for private prayer and meditation. This is a powerful example of how we do not have to look outside the realm of Judaism to bring spirituality and individuality to the Jewish prayer experience.

III. Traditional Jewish Liturgy Has Room for Spontaneous Prayer

Built within the communal Jewish liturgical rubric are times for private, specific and spontaneous prayer. There are three main structures that lend themselves to this endeavor. The silent Amidah is the model par excellence within communal Jewish prayer of having the opportunity to connect to God individually. Within the nineteen blessings are open spaces to individualize one's prayer for that exact moment in time. Making use of the traditional Mi Shebeirach prayer options during the Torah service is another powerful way to personalize prayer within a communal setting. Depending upon which Mi Shebeirach is recited tells the congregation about that moment in time—whether it is the celebration of a new baby, thanksgiving for surviving a dangerous situation, or begging for healing for a sick loved one. The traditional Mi Shebeirach formulations are specific and timely, which makes them absolutely spontaneous because

[2] Niles Goldstein, *Gonzo Judaism*, 11.

of these two central characteristics. Another major liturgical piece that was institutionalized to help Jews connect to God individually is *tachanun*. Tachanun means supplications and is also called *nefilat apayim* (falling on one's face). This section of the prayer service comes after the recitation of the Amidah in the morning and afternoon services. The prayers consist mostly of a variety of biblical verses which are said with one's head on one's hand. *Tachanun* emerged from the rabbinic model laid out in b. Berakhot 16a-17b of offering one's own private, spontaneous prayers to God after the Amidah.

The note in the Birnbaum daily *siddur* concerning the section of *tachanun* for Mondays and Thursdays is as follows:

> *V'hu v'rachum (He, being merciful)* was composed, according to legend, soon after the destruction of the second Temple. It is suggested, however, that it was written during the persecutions of the seventh century. It has been said that whoever can read this long prayer without emotion has lost all feeling for what is great and noble. The soul of an entire people utters these elegies and supplications, and gives voice to its woe of a thousand years.[3]

The ideas in Tachanun are that God should help, save, have mercy on, and pity His people who have sinned. It is a time in the prayer service for individuals to humble themselves dramatically before their Judge and plead for mercy. The recitation of *tachanun* compels the pray-er to make personal and relevant the words he or she is saying. It causes the pray-er to bring him or herself into the moment of prayer in an emotional way. The language, however, is extremely repetitive and self-abnegating, which has caused discomfort among pray-ers for over a century. The idea of *tachanun* should be preserved, but with different language perhaps for the modern Jew.

[3] Birnbaum Daily Siddur, 105-106.

There are also many minor examples of how Jewish prayers are supposed to be made personal and specific to the moment in time. For instance, additional verses are added traditionally to the Birkat Hamazon when said during a wedding or *brit milah.*

By and large, though, Reform Jews do not experience a Torah reading in which a specific Mi Shebeirach is offered. Reform Jews do not generally utter a silent Amidah which has built within it time for personal prayer, and Reform Jews categorically do not recite *tachanun.* The main time within a typical Reform worship service for private, spontaneous prayer is the "silent prayer." After the Amidah has been chanted aloud and together, the prayer-leader will motion the congregation to be seated and to pray silently as the heart may prompt. The time is usually very short and before long the sounds of *Oseh Shalom, Shalom Rav* or *Yihiyu L'ratzon* will begin.

Rabbi Robin Nafshi, in her 2005 rabbinical thesis on ritual hand-washing, addresses the concept of silence after the washing and before the *Motzi* is said. She widened her question to include how Reform Jews handle silence during a typical worship service. She posed the question to the HUCALUM listserve.[4] Rabbi Myra Soifer wrote that at her congregation they "do silence dreadfully." Other clergy said that Jews start squirming in their seats if the silent prayer goes too long. Cantor Jeff Klepper wrote the following:

> A more basic issue is not so much how we deal with silence, but how Reform Jews approach the whole notion of personal prayer. I have seen time and time again, from little *minyanim* to big biennials, that we/they are drawn in to – often powerful – worship with communal readings, songs, and Hebrew chants; but when the leader cuts the cord and lets people off into their own personal space it is for many akin to drifting in a boat without a paddle. Personal prayer is much more than silence...It may involve reading, *davening*, meditation, silent prayer or daydreaming. It may involve vocalized chanting or reading, recitation of memorized prayers, in some cases crying. My point simply is, most of our

[4] This is the email listserve for all alumni of HUC-JIR, regardless of year or program.

> congregants don't know what to do (because it's never been explained to them) when the music and readings stop, and they are on their own.[5]

I do not totally believe that Reform Jews do not know what to do. I think that a larger issue is that, for many Reform Jews, what they want to say to God is too intimate for a group setting, even though it is said silently. Also, it is too difficult to get into the mood for that kind of intimate talking to God in forty seconds.

The other main moment for spontaneous prayer in Reform worship is the singing of the Debbie Friedman Mi Shebeirach. Rabbi Robin Nafshi in a paper entitled, "A Theology of Praying for Healing" writes about the importance Reform Jews put on saying aloud the names of their sick loved ones before the singing of this prayer. Nafshi writes:

> We, the inheritors of the rationalist strain of our religious tradition, have abandoned rationalism in order to pray for healing. Perhaps it is because illness seems so much more widespread today than it was before, and because medicine's limitations have become so apparent.[6]

While we have removed the recitation of a specific Mi Shebeirach addressing particular life cycle situations for congregants, the communal Mi Shebeirach for the ill has taken on tremendous importance for some Reform Jews. This points to the hunger Reform Jews have for "spirituality" or moments outside the realm of rationality in their worship. Perhaps one of the reasons Jews feel that Reform worship is sterile, lacking spirituality, or boring is because we have removed every avenue for *traditional* spontaneous prayer and replaced these moments with a very brief and sometimes awkward silent prayer and a communal song that touches some and leaves others feeling

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[5] Robin Nafshi, "Ritual Hand Washing: Can an Ancient Ritual be Given New Meaning?" (rabbinical thesis, HUC-JIR, New York, 2005), 55-56

[6] "A Theology of Praying for Healing" was written while Robin Nafshi was in rabbinical school for an independent study with Dr. Eugene Borowitz in the Spring of 2004. See pages 12-13.

that Reform worship has become an anti-intellectual, warm and fuzzy sing-along experience.

IV. Writing New Prayers

Writing new prayers is a way to bring an element of spontaneity to Jewish liturgy. This activity falls into several categories. There are new prayers which are written as creative interpretations of standard liturgy. These prayers capture the language and sentiment of today and are based on the timeless themes of our words of old. Two resources for modern liturgical poetry are: Marcia Falk's *Book of Blessings* and the new Reform prayer book, *Mishkan T'filah*. The "creative prayers" found in these prayer books are spontaneous in that they capture a moment in time for the liturgist and are meant to invoke personal emotion in the pray-er today. They are written to help bring *kavanah* to communal worship, which is often a practice of *keva*.

Marcia Falk uses modern Hebrew poems by authors like Zelda, Rachel and Malka Heifetz Tussman as liturgical pieces. Their poems highlight themes from the structured prayer service. The themes of love, loss and peace jump from the page as the pray-er spontaneously latches on to an emotion or feeling in the prayer service. Falk's page for silent prayer is nearly empty, creating a visual void with which to imagine one's own words. The only words on the page are, "Silence: personal meditation."

Falk's introduction to the Amidah says, "With the Amidah, we stand as individuals in community to pray the prayer of the heart."[7] She explains that she includes poems by different women poets to supplement the Amidah to provide a "diversity of

[7] Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessing: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (San Francisco: HarperCollins: 1996), 177.

voices." Falk attests, "Above all, this compilation encourages us to contribute our own voices to the tradition." Falk, like other creative prayer writers and compilers, urges the pray-er to use pre-written words as inspiration for one's own prayers, not as a substitute.

Rabbi Richard Levy, Director of the School of Rabbinic Studies at the Los Angeles Campus of Hebrew Union College, was a major contributor to the new Reform prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah.* One of his prayers appears in the 2002 draft of the prayerbook to accompany *Ahavat Olam* in the Friday night service:

> As You taught Torah to those whose names I bear,
> Teach me Torah, too.
> Its mystery beckons,
> Yet I struggle with its truth.
> You meant Torah for me:
> Did You mean the struggle for me, too?
> Don't let me struggle alone;
> help me
> to understand,
> to be wise, to listen to know...
> Lead me into the mystery.
> *Baruch Ata Adonai, ohev amo Yisrael.*

His prayer captures the main theme of *Ahavat Olam* which is that God has revealed Torah to His people in love. Levy takes ancient words and makes them relevant for the modern pray-er. His poem is in the singular, using the word "me" over and over. *Ahavat Olam* uses the Hebrew plural, "we." Although Levy's words could be said in unison by a congregation, his personalization of the words reminds us of the ancient *piyyutim* and adds a depth of spontaneity to the prayer. When we read his words, we are talking about ourselves now.

Levy acknowledges the struggle many modern Jews have in figuring out the role Torah can play in their lives. It is a struggle with science, with ritual, with feminism. In this prayer, though, we do not abandon Torah because its truths can be hidden. Rather,

we ask God for help in being able to discern wisdom from our ancient scroll. Levy uses the word "mystery" twice in his prayer. This notion encourages the rational, modern pray-er to enter a different realm of spirituality and thought, one in which we do not have all of the answers. When we acknowledge that we do not know, we make room for God to enter our lives, complimenting our doubts with faith and hope. By reading Levy's prayer either silently during worship or aloud with the *kahal*, its words help us infuse the ancient prayer it supplements with more meaning and *kavanah.*

New prayers and rituals are also written outside the realm of the standard prayer service. Often these prayers are written for occasions not addressed in liturgy such as feminine concerns with menstruation, infertility and pregnancy. We even have prayers for pets and prayers for different moments of time experienced by modern Jews such as retirement. Among the myriad works containing these kinds of prayers are three especially helpful resources: Naomi Levy's book, *Talking to God*, Deborah Orenstein's two-volume work, *Lifecycles*, and The Women of Reform Judaism series, *Covenant of the Heart and Covenant of the Soul.*

In her introduction, Naomi Levy discusses the need for spontaneous prayer among Jews. She writes about Jewish private prayers:

> [They are] less literate, without rhyme or meter, without fancy embellishment. [They are] the ones not printed in black and white, but in all the subtlety and mystery of the human soul. They are prayers of life and death, joy and mourning, longing and thanksgiving. Prayers shouted in anger or sung out in love. They are daily prayers, once-in-a-lifetime prayers....What are we to do when the prayer book does not contain the words we are searching for? What do we do when certain feelings well up inside us, but the words to express them are absent from our liturgies?...Some people are shocked when I encourage them to supplement their traditional prayers with personal, spontaneous ones...Composing personal prayers is not a sin, it's a blessing. It is a way to restore our communication with God...It is remarkable to see what can emerge from us when we stop trying to

> pray to God and start *talking* to God instead...But, talking to God doesn't always come easily. Talking to God implies that there is a Being who cares and understands, and, even more than that, one who helps and heals...I believe God is just as outraged as we are by life's unfairness, and just as pained. God is not distant and unfeeling, but compassionate. God suffers when we suffer...Prayer is ultimately an experience, not a request.[8]

Levy cautions that the prayers in her book should not replace one's own personal expressions of prayer. Her prayers can inspire the reader to bring forth his or her own prayers. Levy encourages Jews to step outside the realm of formal prayer and to just talk to God. As we have seen, this is the model presented in the Bible. This kind of prayer focuses on the immediate moment and is not wholly concerned with theology, efficacy and issues of the brain alone. This kind of prayer arises from the heart and is based on belief and faith.

> The following observation appears in the introduction to *Covenant of the Heart*;
>
> Sisterhoods have long been writing their own prayers when there were none available to say what they needed to say. In so doing they reflect the basic dialectic of Jewish prayer- that of *keva* versus *kavana*...Prayer should be directed toward God. How can we guarantee that prayer comes from the heart, unless we take the freedom to create our own words? These words may be thoughts alone, or they may be written down as those in this book...Because fixed prayer should still be free prayer, you get the most out of this book if you experiment with how you use these prayers.[9]

Like Naomi Levy's book, the two volumes published by the Women of Reform Judaism, representing poetry and prayers authored by women, both clergy and congregants alike, urge that the words on the page be inspiration for one's own words of the heart.

Naomi Levy's prayers mirror the themes that many people probably pray about silently. Levy suggests words and images that might make it easier to communicate to

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[8] Naomi Levy, *Talking to God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 2002), 1-17

[9] Ed. Women of Reform Judaism, *Covenant of the Heart*, (New York: National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods: 1993) v-vi.

God about a situation of pain or joy. For instance, she suggests a prayer for one who wants to find love. It is easy to imagine that when someone feels lonely, he or she would naturally call out to God for help:

> Open my heart, God; teach me to remove all obstacles I place in the way of love...Please send me my soul mate, God. Amen.[10]

In Levy's prayers, she suggests self-help techniques based on human psychology and sociology so that the pray-er is not passive, but an active agent in bringing change to his or her life. We can look to God for comfort and strength, but must act ourselves as well.

Many of the sisterhood prayers are meant for communal gatherings. They use some Jewish liturgical God language such as "Adonai" or "God of our ancestors..." Like Richard Levy's prayer, the prayers in *Covenant of the Heart* and *Covenant of the Soul* also often end with a liturgical *chatimah*. Some of the prayers are meant to be recited as meditations before standard prayers are said such as Hamotzi or before Shabbat candle lighting. In this way, they are similar to the model presented in the *tkhines.*

> The hands that kindle these Sabbath lights
> are ageless; they belong to the
> April adolescent and to the winter widow.
>
> They join the powerful hands of our biblical matriarchs, the skeletal
> grasp of all our suffering sisters,
> the iron grip of Israeli womanhood.
>
> The hands that kindle these Sabbath candles
> guard the light of Jewish survival--
> and reach out to touch the world
> in freedom and in peace.
>
> Praised are You, our God,
> Source of strength for the Jewish
> women throughout the ages.

[10] Naomi Levy, *Talking to God*, 43.

Baruch Atah Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.[11]

This prayer is meant to empower Jewish woman by acknowledging their contributions to Judaism throughout the ages from the time of the Bible until today. The ones who would hear this prayer read aloud are prompted by its words to think to themselves about who they are in the list of women mentioned in the prayer. Are they suffering, have they lost a spouse, are they guarders of Judaism in some way? In this way, this prayer is spontaneous in that it asks the listeners to personalize its sentiments for their situation in life. The language is modern and does not draw on the Bible or common liturgical language. It does end with the traditional candle lighting prayer which grounds the whole prayer in Jewish tradition.

V. Suggestions for How to Use Pre-Written Personal Prayers

Naomi Levy and others have written heartfelt prayers concerning a whole variety of situations in which people find themselves. The issue I have is that I cannot picture most Jews picking up one of these prayers to recite when their children go off to college, upon retirement, when a pet dies, or amidst childbirth. And to just say one of these prayers outside of a ritual of some kind feels incomplete. I can picture using prayers such as these in three main ways.

First, these prayers could make their way into regular Reform worship services. The rabbi or prayer leader would call upon those going through a situation to come to the *bimah* to receive one of these blessings in the midst of their community. I could imagine such a blessing to be moving and meaningful to the person/people in a situation and to

[11] *Covenant of the Heart, 79.* Prayer written by Leona Chester, Temple Israel, Stockton, CA.

the larger *kahal.* The issue with this is that it brings spontaneous prayer into the realm of the professional who has some kind of magic power to administer a blessing that an ordinary Jew does not possess.

The second main way I think Jews could meaningfully use prayers such as these is to bring the prayer into bed at night or to a meditative spot. The person could read the prayer and then journal, write original prayers or talk to God. In these ways, the prayer leads to connection with oneself and with God, and the experience is not over when the few lines have been read.

The third way I think Jews can make use of pre-written prayers is to share them with friends and loved ones. In this way, the person going through the situation is surrounded by those who support him or her. It would be natural to have a party for retirement, a ceremony to bury a pet, or a get-together after the birth of a child. Part of the ceremony or celebration could be the sharing with guests of a prayer either pre-written or newly created. This would ground a seemingly secular occasion within Jewish tradition and remind all those present of the sanctity of life. However, there are certain events and conditions of life, such as infertility, which are perhaps harder to share with others. This is why it is so important to have support groups available at Temples for situations that can cause extreme isolation and loneliness due to the nature of the event (miscarriage, infertility and divorce).

The one exception that I see to these three suggestions concerning the use of these prayers is in times of healing. The prayers for healing can be extremely powerful to recite for a loved one or by the one who is ill. These prayers are comforting in and of themselves and are readily accessible by themselves.

In addition, some of Levy's prayers for healing are accompanied by rituals to do while saying the words.

She offers a breathing prayer to say for encouragement to a woman in labor:

(In) Breathe in strength. A child in coming.
(Out) Breathe out fear. These pains will pass...[12]

Levy also offers a prayer for healing that, according to her note, is appropriate to use during a healing touch session with a patient.

> May God heal you, body and soul.
> May your pain cease,
> May your strength increase,
> May your fears be released,
> May blessings, love and joy surround you..
> Amen.[13]

Just by reading these two prayers aloud, it is easy to hear and feel from the rhythm of the words that they would provide relaxation and affirmation. Slow breathing can bring relief of pain. As in many of Naomi Levy's prayers, we do not find specific Jewish theological imagery or biblical references. Her words are generally spiritual, not specifically Jewish, although, in some of her prayers, she does use common biblical/liturgical names for God such as Source of all Life and Creator of all.

VI. Spontaneous Prayer within Pastoral Settings: Learning from the Experts in the Field

I spoke with several rabbis who have focused their work on issues of liturgy and pastoral care: Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, Director of the New York Jewish Healing Center; Rabbi Shira Stern, D.Min, BCC, of The Center for Pastoral Care and Counseling

[12] Naomi Levy, *Talking to God*, 77.
[13] Ibid. 119.

in Marlboro, New Jersey; Dr. Lawrence Hoffman, the Barbara and Stephen Friedman Professor of Liturgy, Worship, and Ritual, and Director of the Synagogue 3000 Initiative for Synagogue Spirituality, HUC-JIR, New York; Rabbi Joseph Ozarowski, Rabbinic Chaplain at the Jewish Healing Center of Chicago: Rabbi Robin Nafshi Director, Rimon: Collaborative Learning at the MetroWest JCC, West Orange, NJ, and Rabbi Dayle Friedman, Director of Hiddur— The Center for Aging and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Our conversations focused on the following key questions:

1. Why do Jews often seem uncomfortable with spontaneous Jewish prayer?
2. What are the hurdles we face when thinking about private prayer?
3. What makes the spontaneous prayer of Jews Jewish?
4. How can Jewish professionals help Jews pray spontaneously?

I shared with the different interviewees my impressions that Jewish patients are reticent to pray or to speak about God. Ozarowski describes his similar experience with Jewish patients. He writes in his book, *To Walk in God's Ways*, that he observed Christian clergy who could eloquently summarize a visit with a patient with a heartfelt spontaneous prayer. He observed that the pastor would say, "I'd like to share a prayer with you" and the Christian patient would find it comforting and welcome. Ozarowski writes: "I remember at the time how impressed I was with this technique, assuming it was not part of Jewish tradition. But I thought I would give it a tryout with a congregant."[14] The following is Ozarowski's verbatim account of such a visit:

Congregant: Well, I am looking forward to getting out of here.

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[14] Joseph S. Ozarowski, *To Walk in God's Ways* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.: 1995), 43.

> Rabbi: I know you are, and we look forward to having you back at *shul.* Well, it has been good seeing you. Do you mind if I pray with you here for your recovery?
> Congregant: Why would you want to do that?
> Rabbi: Well, er, um, I just hope that the *Ribbono Shel Olam* [Master of the Universe] smiles upon you and guides you as you face the future back home.

Ozarowski writes, "It appears that Jews do not expect or seem to need spontaneous bedside prayer." He explains this phenomenon by saying that Jews are used to a fixed liturgy. However, because of the rabbinic tradition of private prayer, Ozarowski writes about trying to revive this tradition. He explains that he now just says his prayer. For example, he may now say, "Let us hope and pray that the *Ribbono Shel Olam* will strengthen you and guide you through the times to come."[15] Asking a Jewish patient to pray feels foreign and Christian. However, sharing a hope and prayer feels comforting and appropriate.

Friedman acknowledged that it is almost more taboo to talk about prayer then about sex or money. Personal spirituality has not been cultivated in liberal Judaism. The Jewish spirituality and healing movement has changed some of this. She finds that many Jews have a great hunger to explore their own spirituality. Many Jews want someone to come to visit them when they are ill and to offer something spiritual. Like Ozarowski, Friedman said that when she visits with someone, she does not ask if the person would like a prayer. Rather, she offers a blessing. In this way, the Jewish caregiver can say, "May you be blessed with strength, healing and peace..." or whatever would pertain to the individual's situation. Friedman says that this act alone takes that narrow place of the sickbed and opens doors across time and space. And a blessing somehow *feels* Jewish. The only issue I find with this is that if the blessing does not come to fruition it is as if the

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[15] Joseph S. Ozarowski, *To Walk in God's Ways*, 44.

person has not been blessed but cursed. However, if the blessing is worded as an expression of hope rather than as a magical formula, it's "success" can be felt in more abstract and metaphoric terms.

As an educator, I am interested in "enduring understandings" to borrow a phrase from the educational theory called Understanding by Design[16]. Of course I am concerned with the here and now in the classroom or informal educational setting, but I am equally concerned that the time spent learning and doing can have a lasting impact. In contrast with this, Stern spoke with me about the idea that prayer is about the now. She said that a theology of presence is concerned with bringing herself and God into the sickroom. It does not matter what happens later. Faith means that the chaplain prayed for and with someone, and both were changed through the experience. Sometimes that change has lasting impact on one's thoughts, mood and resolve. Sometimes the prayer leaves a feeling of calm for that moment. It is not that one has to turn off one's brain when it comes to spontaneous and private prayer. It is that one has to turn on one's heart and soul to reaching out to God in the moment of need.

Sometimes there is nothing that we can do other than call out to God. It is not thought-out, it naturally pours out. At other times, we are in pain or overwhelmed by joy, and want to connect with God, but feel unsure how to. Weintraub believes that part of our spiritual block is that we live in a scientific world governed by numbers and tests. The chaplain or spiritual guide proposes another perspective. It is not necessarily opposed to the first reality, but it is beyond it. It is in struggling with faith that we feel comfortable living within both realms.

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[16] Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, (Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curricular Development: 1998), 10-11.

Another barrier to prayer can be language. There are Jews who may feel that if they do not know Hebrew or cannot recite a fixed prayer from memory, then they cannot authentically or correctly pray. Weintraub reminds us that prayer can often be post-verbal. He explained to me that words are pointers to prayer and are not the prayer itself. The prayer is a feeling from within, a change of character, or an experience one has. For many people this is liberating. They have worried about saying the right words. However, prayer is the dialogue, the connection. Weintraub says that we know in our heart afterwards if the prayer was actualized and expressed.

Language can also be a hindrance when it comes to God-talk. Friedman said that sometimes a patient is praying even when he or she would not call it that or recognize it as such. If someone says, "I don't believe in God" it is important to talk about what they do believe. Often what they describe is a way to understand God within Jewish tradition even if that person believes that his or her ideas are outside the bounds of acceptable theology.

Even though our words are not our whole prayer, the words we say can be extremely powerful. Like most Jews, and most people, I have personally experienced how talking, crying and even shouting at God can feel so cleansing. My question is what is Jewish about this act. Like Ozarowski, Weintraub suggests using certain idioms and patterns in one's individual prayers to ground the words in Jewish tradition. For instance, both suggest using the name, *Ribbono Shel Olam,* which appears in Hasidic prayers when addressing God. Hoffman said that to think there has to be something specifically Jewish as opposed to non-Jewish about private prayer is a mistake. There is a universality of prayer. Prayer is about the human condition.

With this said, Hoffman explains that people experience the world as members of a group. Whether in a family unit, social circle, or religious group, there are metaphors and lingo of the group that bring familiarity. There are words and images that are understood by all in a family or community. When used, the words achieve depth and resonance. This is true for Jews as well. There are phrases such as "Go from strength to strength" or "Our Father our King" or "God of our ancestors" that people know. The trick is to find the right words to touch a particular patient. In certain Jewish circles, *Ribbono Shel Olam* will bring immediate identification, and for other Jews these three words will mean nothing. If the words are lost, the metaphor or prayer is lost. Thus, while prayer is essentially universal and human, our experience of humanity is as Jews. This is how our prayer is Jewish.

Stern explains that there are patients who crave the personal touch of spontaneous prayer, but at the same time crave the familiar words of a prayer they have heard before. This is why personalizing the Mi Shebeirach, Vidui or Priestly Benediction can meet both of these spiritual needs. Stern reminds Jewish spiritual guides to stop performing for the patient and to start articulating their truth. All the chaplain is doing is transforming the patient's or congregant's words into some kind of whole truth. The chaplain is helping them get their words out.

How do we help Jews move beyond the cerebral Judaism of rationalism into a spiritual realm, especially when they may have heard little articulated about this aspect of Judaism from their *bimahs?* Hoffman explains that belief and disbelief are categories that only apply to a small portion of what we know and say— they belong to the scientific realm. Often we believe something if we can see it. However, even in the

realm of science, there are things we believe that we cannot [yet] prove. There is a realm even for scientists that is "un-sayable." Truth and false are terms that only apply to science. In prayer, we should not be speaking in these terms. Our prayers are about hope. Saying, "On that day the Lord shall be One" is not scientific, it is a statement of hope. Our statements bring possibilities into realities. However, there are conditions for a sentence or statement to work. The conditions have to be that those who utter the prayer have within their spiritual and religious purviews an understanding of God and the world that fits what they are saying.

Hoffman says that prayer should be understood as poetry. When we read prose, we determine whether it is fiction or nonfiction and whether it is true or false. This is not how we approach poetry and should not be how we approach prayer. If we read prayer as prose, it is easy to think it is false, and to get rid of it. Fiction or nonfiction for a poem is not applicable. What makes poetic language work is not that it is true or false, but that it touches us.

In an article about his own daughter's battle with illness, Hoffman writes:

> Shira, don't forget, continues to want prayer, even though she too doesn't actually believe in it; so do I. What, then, are we doing when we pray with the sick, the pained, the troubled, with little likelihood that God will intervene; and the realization that even if God does inexplicably manifest healing here, in the very next room God equally inexplicably does not.[17]

Prayer "works" not because we believe in it. It works because it touches us and gives us hope.

We may even need to move beyond language, says Hoffman, to achieve whatever that part of the service is meant to accomplish. With Hebrew, we can get carried away

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[17] Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Post Colonial Liturgy in the Land of the Sick," *CCAR Journal,* summer, 2006, 10-35.

with the mantra of *davening* it and get lost in its sound and rhythm. Music can do things for our souls that just reading cannot accomplish.

There are ways within a Reform worship setting to make room for spontaneous prayer. Hoffman suggests that before the recitation of the Mourners' Kaddish, congregants can stand and say a sentence about the person for whom they are mourning. Hoffman was part of a service in which candle lighting was followed by the singing of *Or Zarua.* Congregants then shared a word with the *kahal* about the *tzadikim* in their family. Hoffman reiterates that there are plenty of places within the service where moments for people to tell their individual stories come naturally.

VII. Conclusion

Thus, whether we are speaking about bringing elements of tradition into liberal settings, from Hasidic/mystical teachings to prayers long since excised, or are speaking about creating new rituals for personal expression in worship, there should always be room for spontaneous and private prayer within Jewish liturgical settings. This is true because worship is about making connections. We are connecting to our deepest selves, to our people, to our work as Jews for *tikkun olam,* and to God. This can only be done when we find ourselves in the words we are saying.

Clearly our rabbis and teachers who are involved daily in the pursuit of providing pastoral care have much to teach us about spontaneous prayer. We learn from them about how to overcome the boundaries that stymie so many Jews in this holy pursuit. We learn about language and form for our prayers. Mostly, we learn about how to embrace the mystery of life by allowing for faith and hope amidst stoic rationality.

Conclusion

The model of spontaneous prayer as represented in the Bible is the basis for our pursuit of this ideal still today. We chant the words of Moses, *El na r'fanah la* with patients seeking healing. We look to Hannah's silent prayer as inspiration for us to cry to God in pain and anguish. We believe that we can talk to God as a partner in a dialogue because this is the way our biblical ancestors related to God.

The rabbis of the Talmud put great emphasis on free expression of prayer before God. They cautioned against making prayer fixed and rote. It is no surprise that their heartfelt prayers became our fixed liturgy. Their sentiments were timeless and their language eloquent. Their words mixed seamlessly with biblical phrases and imagery.

The *piyyutim* of the Middle Ages paved the way for the creative liturgy we are writing today. We write liturgical poetry for many of the same reasons: to mark our struggles in time, to add newness to the written word in the prayer book, and to highlight certain themes that may get lost amidst reciting words from memory. All of these goals for creative liturgy are based on the desire to add spontaneity and relevance to the worship service.

Mysticism and Hasidism have added much to the discussion of Jewish spontaneous prayer. Mostly, what we learn from these traditions is about how to infuse our worship with *kavanah*. Learning from the great masters of these traditions about how to focus, concentrate, and transcend the ego in prayer is invaluable for our discussion. They teach us that individuality and spirituality do not come from writing our own words alone, but from pouring our souls into our age-old words.

Prayers written by and for women spanning the centuries have also added an important layer to our discussion of spontaneous prayer. From the *tkhines* to modern feminist liturgy, women's prayers are often also concerned with *kavanah.* More than this characteristic, though, is the notion that prayers should address our very lives and experiences. If we cannot find ourselves in the words on our pages then we must write ourselves in.

In recent times it has been with the Jewish healing movement that we have begun to re-embrace the notion of spontaneous Jewish prayer. Often Jews do not know about our long history of spontaneous prayer and feel embarrassed by what feels like a Christian pursuit. It is with chaplains and spiritual guides that Jews are able to give voice to their most intimate desires for God to hear them. But we need to speak about spontaneous prayer a lot more (from the *bimah*, in articles, in lectures and the sickroom) so that it is not so taboo a subject wrought with tension.

This thesis has represented a brief historical trajectory of the different phases of Jewish liturgy to highlight the long tradition of spontaneous prayer.

I have now come to affirm several beliefs about spontaneous prayer:

1. Prayer comes from a different place than our minds alone. It is acceptable, possible, and even preferable to be able to live with ambiguity, dissonance and contradiction as a Jew because this allows us to be open to the great mystery of God and life.
2. We do not need to invent new rituals, programs and prayers outside the realm of Jewish tradition to give Jews avenues for spontaneous prayer. Built within our Jewish liturgical tradition are opportunities for private

prayer within communal and solo settings. Within liberal Judaism, many of these liturgical rubrics have been excised from our prayer experiences. They should be reinstated within a liberal Jewish spirit to give our congregants their much desired chance to individually connect to God.

3. We need to pray to God regularly in synagogue and alone so that, when a moment arises in which we desperately desire to connect to God, we are well practiced and feel natural and comfortable with how we do this.

4. We need to share a Jewish prayer language with our congregants so that when we pray, our experience is Jewish and meaningful. When words, images and phrases resonate with someone, they become powerful and comforting in times of need.

5. In pastoral settings we should recite prayers such as the Shema, even when outside of "appropriate" liturgical contexts[1], because Jews know this prayer, feel an emotional connection to it, and feel that its recitation links them to generations and generations who also sought God in times of stress and joy.

6. Jews seem to be seeking more "spirituality," whatever that means. Often the quest for spirituality is based on attaining certain individual feelings. Jews want to feel good during services, to be entertained, engaged and affirmed. These are all pieces, perhaps, of spirituality.

[1] Rabbi Judith Spicehandler of North Shore Congregation Israel in Chicago related a time in which she said the Shema with a child before surgery as a way to bring comfort. The child was used to saying the Shema before bedtime, and the words provided familiarity and peace.

Jews want to feel that the service speaks to them while simultaneously feeling a sense of communal belonging. Jews are seeking Buddhism, Kabbalah, and Renewal partially as paths of psychological self-help or to find transcendental meaning and connection. They are seeking to feel part of a cohesive, larger whole. Encouraging Jews onto the path of spontaneous private prayer can promote moving inward, becoming isolated from the community, and becoming consumed by self-needs. To avoid this, it is important to remember when teaching about and providing venues for spontaneous prayer, the Hasidic dictum that one's prayer should be a reflection of God's desires. Remembering this helps the pray-er to evaluate his or her prayer in terms of a larger picture. Thus, the pray-er develops a sense of humility and of being part of, not separate from, other human beings in the journey of life.

I have developed an outline to assist with private prayer to God:

Blessed are You, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors. You are_____

I have felt Your presence _____

I ask You now _____

Healing means _____

Bring _____

Shalom goes beyond peace to wholeness. I find You God in the striving for Shalom. I thank You for _____

Amen.

Sometimes we have pray-er's-block similar to writer's block and by filling in these blanks our soul may awaken to its deepest desires.

I also recommend looking through a prayer book and writing lists of God's names and attributes. Then, when we want to call out to God, we can do so with specific Jewish liturgical language that feels fitting for our moment. Sometimes we need God to be Shepherd, Creator, or Redeemer. Other times we want God to be our Rock.

Let us gain strength, resolve and comfort

from the knowledge

that while the quest to connect with God is eternal,

our Sages have blazed a path before us.

May we struggle each day of *our* lives in this holy pursuit.

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