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Nineteen Attempts at Describing My Personal Theology

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Introduction

This paper about my “personal theology” focusses on the 19 topics of the Weekday Amidah. Jewish tradition considered these ideas so important that they had to be mentioned three times daily on a weekday, and some of them additionally on Shabbat and Holydays. Over the past two thousand years they have become the backbone of Jewish thought, since they constitute the content of “the” prayer, התפילה, as רחל called the Amidah. The structure of the different Berakhot will offer the framework for my own thoughts on God, Israel, Torah, belief, worship, history and many more features of Jewish theology. My main interest is not of liturgical nature - the wording of the single blessings and rendering an own version is not so much the topic of this paper. It is rather an exploration of how I perceive these ideas: Which meanings can I ascribe to them as a Jewess of the 21st century? What is their relevance to the religious and material world I live in? How do they define my Reform Jewish belief?

My renditions are far from constituting a comprehensive, systematic theology. Each chapter is rather a mini-essay, not all-encompassing in itself, differing in length and depth, but nevertheless pieces of a mosaic which, on putting them together, offers a larger image, despite all its fractures.

1. אבות

Converting into Jewish Peoplehood?

Judaism is clearly defined as a national religion: The founding myth of Jewish peoplehood is rooted in a tribal concept of descending from the 12 sons of the same father, Jacob-Israel. This idea of a biological continuity is supported by the official halakhic definition of Who is a Jew?: Either someone born by a Jewish mother or someone who absolved a conversion process. Though offering an entrance into Judaism through religious confession, Conversion is not really seen as equally worthy as the Birth by a Jewish mother: A convert is bound into the tribal concept by adopting him/her as a “son/daughter of our Father Abraham”. That clarifies his/her status in the eyes of other born Jews, but leaves a feeling of estrangement on both sides. It is similar to real family life: Someone who married in will only be recognized as belonging to the clan after many years of having shown by their behaviour, belief and family loyalty (by not divorcing the Jewish partner and by bringing up the children Jewishly) that they truly belong. Only their children will be entirely accepted as belonging to the peoplehood.

Despite the awareness of the possibility of converting into Judaism, there is a strong notion among religious and especially secular Jews that being Jewish is something inherent to a person by birth and cultural upbringing, that it is not a matter of choice. How daring it is for a convert to claim they belong religiously to a national collective he/she wasn't born into, finds its expression also in the description by the contemporary philosopher Daniel Boyarin:

“(...) Jews do not sense of themselves that their association is confessional, that it is based on common religion, for many people whom both religious and secular Jews call Jewish neither believe nor practice the religion at all. This kind of ‘racialism’ is built into the formal cultural system itself. While you can convert in to Judaism, you cannot convert out, and anyone born of Jewish parents is Jewish, even if she doesn’t know it. Jewishness is thus certainly not contiguous with modern notions of race, which have been, furthermore discredited empirically. Nor are Jews marked off biologically, as people are marked for sex; nor finally, can Jews be reliably identified by a set of practices, as for example gay people can. On the other hand, Jewishness is not an affective association of individuals either. Jews in general feel not that Jewishness is something they have freely chosen but rather that it is an essence - an essence often nearly empty of any content other than itself - which has been ascribed - sometimes even imposed - on them by birth.”¹

Though the tribal narrative suggests that Jewish peoplehood is based on biological continuity, I would doubt that there is a genetic relationship between Jews from Yemen, Ethiopia, Europe, the Caucasus, India, China, Northern Africa or other historic Jewish communities. Not a “Jewish gene” but rather a set of practices, beliefs and commonly-shared myths constituted and preserved Jewish peoplehood through more than 3,000 years. I find the idea of Amos Oz and Fanya Oz-Salzberger convincing that mainly texts and a culture of storytelling, studying, discussing and teaching texts are the bond which hold the diverse Jewish communities, spread around the world, together.² The diversity of Jewish cultures, customs, languages, and phenotypes contradicts the fiction of an unambiguous identity, passed on by biological descent. But still, the national myth of a collective, descending from one family and having been chosen by God at Sinai as His people had become central for constituting coherence inside and boundaries to the outside.

How can such a static and exclusive concept be made permeable without giving up the national myth?

¹ Boyarin, Daniel: *A Radical Jew. Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 241.

² Oz, Amos / Oz-Salzberger, Fania: *Jews and Words*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012

Already the Torah opens a way to make the Sinaitic covenant inclusive

(Deut. 29:9-14):

אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני יהוה אלהיכם ראשיכם שבטיכם זקניכם ושטריכם כל
איש ישראל: טפכם נשיכם וגרך אשר בקרב מחניך מחטב עציך עד שאב מימיר:
לעברך בברית יהוה אלהיך ובאלתו אשר יהוה אלהיך כרת עמך היום: למען
הקים־אתך היום לו לעם והוא יהיה־לך לאלהים כאשר דבר־לך וכאשר נשבע
לאבתיך לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב: ולא אתכם לבדכם אנכי כרת את־הברית הזאת
ואת־האלה הזאת: כי את־אשר ישנו פה עמנו עמד היום לפני יהוה אלהינו ואת
אשר איננו פה עמנו היום:³

Thus the covenant is open into the future, it doesn't encompass only those present or only their biological descendance. A *sugya* in the Babylonian Talmud refers to these verses and applies them to future converts, without integrating them as biological offspring through Abraham:⁴

א"ל רב אחא בריה דרבא לרב אשי גרים מאי א"ל אע"ג דאינהו לא הוו מזלייהו הוו דכתיב את אשר
ישנו פה עמנו עומד היום לפני ה' אלהינו ואת אשר איננו פה.

But isn't it a bit presumptuous for a convert to claim that his newly-found religious conviction allows him to put him/herself into this chain and to pray to "the God of our Forefathers" (and in a Liberal context also of "our Foremothers")? The first Berakhah of the Amidah invokes the rewards of the ancestors (זכות אבות). But can a convert be so *chutzpedik* as to demand that God takes the rewards of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rivkah, Leah and Rachel) into account instead of his/her own missing rewards? Why should he/she be entitled to say with other (born) Jews whose biological continuity back to the Sinaitic revelation is not questioned: ...אשר בחרתנו..., אשר הוציאנו ממצרים..., אשר קדשנו במצוותיו...? These issues go beyond a personal confession, they talk of a national context.

³ "You are standing today, **all of you**, before the Lord your God: **the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the Lord your God**, which the Lord your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as **his people**, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. **It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today.**"

⁴ BT Shabbat 146a: R. Aha son of Raba asked R. Ashi. What about proselytes? - Though they were not present, their guiding stars were present, as it is written, [Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath], but with him that stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day.

Halakhically these questions have been addressed by Maimonides in his “Letter to Ovadiah the Convert” where he states:

“Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessing and prayer, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in the congregation. The reason for this is, that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God (...).

In the same way as he converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts future generations through the testament he left to his children and household after him. Thus Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Torah Judaism.”⁵

Though in Jewish tradition accepted as normative, this answer doesn’t solve the problem of the practical acceptance of converts because it indirectly confirms the biological self-definition of the people of Israel as descending from the patriarch Jacob-Israel, the father of the twelve tribes.

Conversion is thus a process of mutual adoption, and it doesn’t end with the formal conclusion of the Giyur before a Bet Din. It is a lifelong process, and a convert should be aware that until the end of his/her days, he/she will be asked about the motivation and the whereabouts of this decision. It can only be successful when he/she finds an answer that doesn’t refer only to religious contents but also to the national-historic context. Both sides have to learn that boundaries-crossing doesn’t erase the boundaries as well as that it doesn’t threaten the group identity. A convert has to learn not only Torah, Halakhah, how to read and pray in Hebrew, but also how to read cultural codes of belonging, not hiding one’s own biography, national context and cultural upbringing, rootedness. He/she has to relate actively to Jewish peoplehood as myth and as reality, and find an own place in it.

A model for this active affirmation I see in the description of the Bikkurim offering in Deut. 26:1-11: When the basket full of first-fruits is handed over to the Kohen and put down in front of the altar, the subject of the sacrifice recites a long declamation. Astonishingly, not the thanksgiving for the harvest and the agricultural fertility are the content of these sentences but a historical depiction of the forefathers’ way into Egypt, the liberation from there and the entrance into the Promised Land. It is a stereotyped formula, not regarding the personal

⁵ Maimonides: Letter to Ovadiah the Proselyte, <http://torahjew.blogspot.de/2011/05/maimonides-letter-to-obadiah-proselyte.html>, 7. 8. 2016.

status of the sacrifice-offerer. By reciting it in the grammatical First Person, he re-reads himself actively into this narrative: “**And now I** bring the first-fruits of the land that you, God, gave **me**” (verse 10). It is a personal affirmation of a national memory context which defines also the entrance into the relationship to God. It is neither exclusively about a religious conviction nor about genetic links to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but about the acceptance of a national myth. Only by perceiving the new Jewish environment not only as a religious context but as a socio-historical one, by sharing the life, the rituals, the sorrows of this collective will one become an accepted member of this society. The weaving of one’s own life thread into the fabric of the adopted community will lead slowly to being counted as belonging. There is room within the multiplicity of diverse Jewish biographies and confessions because the idea of unambiguous identities is a fiction, not only in Judaism.

2. גבורות

How Does God Intervene in History or Renew Life Beyond Death?

Monotheistic religions are based on the assumption of the omnipotence of God. Jewish tradition uses powerful images to testify that God created heaven and earth and afterwards remained in charge of the course of the world. God shows presence and guidance by intervening in History - in that of individuals, of Israel and of the nations. In awe and full of admiration I acclaim the wonder of creation and its daily renewal in my morning prayers, all of natural science hasn’t been able to diminish this magic for me, rather the opposite. But as a child of the 20th century, having grown up among survivors of two World Wars, of the Nazi and of the Stalinist persecutions, I have trouble affirming God’s strong hand in history effecting spectacular wonders like the crossing of the Red Sea or an opening of the earth and devouring of the perpetrators of crimes. The efficacy of God in the course of the world won’t be made obvious by such natural wonders. But I am also not willing to believe that God is unaffected by human suffering and injustice - such an idea would make hope, prayer and belief in redemption useless.

For my thinking about the hidden ways of God’s impact in the world I find valuable what the German pastor and resistance fighter, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote while he was incarcerated in a Nazi prison. Under the title “A few articles of faith on the sovereignty of God in history” he formulated his personal creed:

“I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose he needs humans who make the best use of everything. I believe that God will give us all the strength we need to help us resist in all time of distress. But he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on Him

alone. A faith such as this should allay all our fears for the future. I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are turned to good account, and that it is no harder for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds. I believe that God is no timeless fate, but that he waits for and answers sincere prayers and responsible actions.”⁶

God uses humans as tools for Divine intervention in the world. Believing in God, humans are able to develop unexpected powers which help to overcome obstacles and limitations. This is the way how God supports the falling, frees prisoners and sustains life in love. Not a big, supranatural wonder makes God visible in history but the belief of humans that “with you I can run against a troop, and with my God I can leap over a wall” (Psalm 18:29). With such an attitude of trust (אמונה) I may face all the worldly affairs, not in the expectation that God will intervene in delicate situations but that God will grant me sufficient strength to cope with these challenges. And I have to take into account that also my adversaries and evil people may change their ways because in an inexplicable way humans can be influenced by God, also when they don’t believe themselves. Because the change of behaviour and attitudes is part of the Human condition, it is an innate capability of every human. In my lifetime I have seen realizations of God’s presence in history (e.g. the fall of the Berlin Wall), when in an unexpected way people acted together constructively to change an unbearable situation. But I have also seen many injustices, wars and slaughtering of innocent people while all prayers for God’s intervention didn’t bear fruit. I have no answers for God’s הסתר פנים but I don’t give up my hope that prayers and the God-inspired actions of humans will eventually bring relief.

A special case of God interfering with nature and history is Death and the question of the renewing of Life beyond death (תחיית המתים). Reform Judaism has a long tradition of erasing this prayer as “unscientific” or avoiding answers by paraphrasing it in a more vague manner (מחיה הכל). I personally do believe that there is a place in God’s world, unlike what we know materially as heaven and earth, where our immortal souls come together after our physical death. I don’t believe in reincarnation (גילגול נשמות) because each soul is/was very intrinsically linked with a certain person, and although this person has died and the soul left the body, it still carries something immutable of this person with it. I have no idea how this could look like: a soul without its body (is it like a transparent ghost but then, which phase of life shall the ghostly body resemble?) and how a world functions without any bodily needs and pleasures. Human thoughts about this topic cannot be anything but speculation but I do assume that souls who were close in this life will find each other again in another life.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: After Ten Years. in: Letters and Papers From Prison. Princeton University Press, 2012. Quote from: <http://justitiablog.blogspot.de/2009/06/bonhoeffer-and-resistance.html>, 8. 8. 2016.

Nothing of this can be said with any provable certainty, it is a matter of belief, and at least in cases of bereavement and mourning I have experienced this idea as consoling.

3. קדושה

Holiness of God / Holiness of Times / Holiness of Humans

The sanctity of God (קדושת ה') is apparently so ineffable that we humans can only imitate the words of the angels in their triple praise of God when we say the *Kedushah*. God is the totally different and unique being, therefore His essence as קדוש, something which is apart from anything else. Thus the character of God is undescrivable but we cannot but use human language to make it comprehensible. All these attributes and names show only one aspect of God's being, sometimes apparently contradictive (e.g. רחום וחנון versus אל קנא) but they are simultaneously integrated parts of the entire character. We have no words and therefore no categories to describe the holiness of God's innerworldly and supraworldly presence at the same time except by testifying to God's existence. In moments of deepest awe, shock or joy we have no other words other than exclaiming: "Oh my God!". The naming as קדוש (the Holy One) is the only way we can express God's distinction from all human experience and classification, acknowledging that we can not nearly comprehend God's character.

On Shabbatot and Holy Days the central 13 Berakhot of weekdays are replaced by a praise of the sanctity of specific times. This is actually a holiness which is produced by humans at God's command. A Saturday has no innate sanctity unless we mark it as Shabbat; Holy Days confer their sanctity only on those who keep them holy. We do this as a means to experience God's holiness in our limited capability of experience. This is what Abraham Joshua Heschel meant with his calling Shabbat a "cathedral built in time". Since the destruction of the "Holy of the Holies" together with the Temple in Jerusalem there are no concrete spaces anymore where God seems to be present in a permanent way. Since then sanctifying times has replaced the pilgrimage to a certain geographical spot, and it is a powerful way to experience a total different reality which exists only when one is ready to establish this holiness in personal and in congregational life. Observance of the traditional *Halakhot* for Shabbat and Holy Days helps to "set apart" these times from the rest of the week but decisive is only the inner will to look for the special sanctity of this day and to enjoy it.

There is also a holiness of humans which simultaneously is innate to them but also something that they have to strive to acquire. Together with his/her soul, each person is

equipped with sanctity from the first moment of his/her coming into being: the unification of sperm and egg, with the blessing of God. Embodied by the soul (נשמה) this holiness is each person's inseparable link to God. It is more than what secular language would call "dignity of every human being". Even if a person doesn't give expression to this part of his/her personality due to a narcissistic or even evil character, this sacredness is still there albeit unconsciously and partially unrecognizable for the rest of the world. This is also the reason why the death penalty is a sin directly against God.

But there is also holiness as a mandate. Lev. 19 commands us to be or to become holy, and this mitzvah is rooted in God's own sanctity. One has to achieve holiness by striving for it, by being a worthy צלם אלהים. But how can *Imitatio Dei* for the sake of sanctity be exercised if קדושה is our way of describing God's distinction?

A sugya in BT Sotah 14a gives advice how such a rapprochement could look:⁷

ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא: מאי דכתיב (דברים יג ה) אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר (דברים ד ד) כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא [אל קנא]?! אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה.
מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב (בראשית ג כא) ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם - אף אתה הלבש ערומים;
הקב"ה ביקר חולים, דכתיב (בראשית יח א) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא - אף אתה בקר חולים;
הקב"ה ניחם אבלים, דכתיב (בראשית כה יא) ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו - אף אתה נחם אבלים;
הקב"ה קבר מתים, דכתיב (דברים לד ו) ויקבר אותו בגיא - אף אתה קבור מתים.

Imitatio Dei and striving for holiness is mainly an issue of ethical behaviour. As the context of Lev. 19 shows: Holiness becomes visible in simple acts of גמילות חסדים, it happens in the social realm, not in the field of cultic activities around ritual, also not in the field of prayer or Torah study of an individual alone. It is not an intellectual

⁷ R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text (Deut. 13:5): Ye shall walk after the Lord your God? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah; for has it not been said (Deut. 4:24): For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire? But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written (Gen. 3:21): And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them, so do thou also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written (Gen. 18:1): And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre, so do thou also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written (Gen. 25:11): And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son, so do thou also comfort mourners. The Holy One, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written (Deut. 34:6): And He buried him in the valley, so do thou also bury the dead.
Translation from: <http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Sotah.pdf>, 9. 8. 2016.

effort, one doesn't have to be learned for this, only wisdom of the heart is needed. Achieving holiness is thus possible for everybody.

דעת. 4.

Knowledge, Understanding and Discernment as Reparation for Transgressing

At first glance, it is a bit astonishing that the Berakhah about Knowledge is placed immediately after the theologically loaded topic of Sanctity. Isn't that an issue of intellectual capacities which humans possess to an individually different extent? Why such a human category at this place?

The wording of the Berakhah - השכל, בינה, דעת - gives already a hint: Not knowledge alone, not the pure gathering of facts, sources and dates is the aim. Real learning takes place only if it is accompanied by understanding which by itself leads to the ability of discernment. Studying Torah for its own sake is fruitless if it doesn't lead to practice and to ethical action. דעת is not an academic dispute or the showing-off of rich factual knowledge; it is bound to social responsibility, it is a learning not only with the brain but also with the heart. If this connection is not made, study is just idle, self-justifying and a world-fleeing occupation.

Knowledge should lead to insight (בינה), from there grows the capability of discernment (השכל). This explains why the Berakha for Knowledge has been placed immediately after the praise of God's holiness: It is about taking seriously that humans were created in the image of God. The Biblical myth of Gan Eden depicts Adam and Eve's transgression of God's prohibition to eat from the Tree of Knowing Good and Evil (עץ הדעת טוב ורע) Gen. 2:17; Gen. 3:17f) as the reason for their expulsion from this paradise. I wouldn't describe this transgression as "Original Sin" as Christian theology does, but nevertheless this act changed the *Conditio Humana* radically. Not only regarding the Biblical curse, laid upon the woman and the man (Gen. 3:17f) but rather in the sense of the necessity of leaving paradise and becoming God's partners in this world. Applying the newly-acquired capability to know and to discern is the human reparation (Wiedergutmachung) for transgressing God's command. Upon eating from the Tree of Knowledge, humans lost their innocence of not knowing, of not being concerned and of not being responsible. Now that they do know, there are no excuses anymore, they have become like God, and actually only now they are enabled to prove that they are created in the image of God, to make a difference in this world past the gates of Gan Eden. The shared responsibility in guiding this world made it necessary to discuss what it means to be created as צלם אלהים after the Holiness of God had been acclaimed.

The siddur of congregation “Kol Haneshamah” in Jerusalem expresses in its version of the **עלינו** this thought in its acknowledgment of God’s majesty which obliges us to contribute our mite and become God’s partners in repairing the world:

”על כן נקווה לך ה' אלהינו לראות מהרה בתפארת עוזך להעביר רשעות מן הארץ והאלילים כרות יכרתון. ותקן עולם במלכות שדי, להפנות אליך כל רשעי ארץ יכירו וידעו כל יושבי תבל כי שותפים כולנו בתיקון עולם כי המלכות שלך היא.”⁸

The responsibility of being God’s partners, bestowed upon us by knowledge and discernment, explains why this Berakha had to precede all the other petitions because in each of the following issues humans have to take an active role.

5. תשובה

Have I Ever Been Where תשובה Requires Me to Return to?

Several explanations have been given for what makes humans different from other mammals who share more than 90 per cent of the same genetic material with us. Some have suggested that it is our ability of thinking, or the high developed system of language - though we know that animals also have forms of deriving abstract knowledge or of communicating with each other. Others would say that humour is specific to humans, the ability to laugh at ourselves and about the absurdities of life. I would agree with all of them, especially that smiling and laughing is essential for human life. But I think the true genuine difference is that humans are able to make תשובה, to reflect their way of living, to repent and to begin anew.

The belief and the mandate of making תשובה is a unique gift because it offers the possibility of change, repair and improvement. This is not about perfecting the Ego, as we know it from the slogans of advertising campaigns or from books about optimizing the Self, it is rather about regaining an awareness that we are not God, to obtain a more humble sense of the right proportions. It should be guided by what the Prophet Micah recommends as the appropriate approach:

הגיד לך אדם מה־טוב ומה־ה' דורש ממך כי אם־עשות משפט ואהבת חסד
והצנע לכת עם־אלהיך:⁹

⁸ The Service of the Heart. Siddur, Jerusalem: Kehilat Kol HaNeshama 2007, p. 68:

”We therefore hope, Adonai our God, to see Your mighty glory soon, to end evil in the land, and cut off all idolatry, to repair the world for God’s majesty, to turn the hearts of the world’s evildoers to You. Every inhabitant of the earth shall recognize and know that we are all partners in repairing the world, for the dominion is Yours.”

⁹ Mic. 6:8. “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Repentance demands of us honesty and a readiness to fight hard our inner battles. Often we feel comfortable with our behavioural patterns and customs, we have developed a convenient narrative of ourselves, that depicts us rather as innocent victims than as agents of shaping our lives. תשובה requires taking responsibility also for the less successful parts of our lives and to ask ourselves inconvenient questions about what went wrong, when and why. This questioning is accompanied by sadness, sorrow and shame, and there is no short-cut for making it easier. It needs devotion, patience and critical self-acceptance, the determined wish to heal one's brokenness and to avoid excuses. We can rely on finding strength for this process of תשובה in prayer but we cannot expect that God is going to fix these things for us.

The Bible offers the image of the scapegoat which was laden with the sins and the guilt of the community and sent into the desert, making it impossible for him to come back (to guarantee this, his neck was broken in Second Temple times). We cannot reverse what happened in the past, we can only identify the temptations and the self-damaging behaviour of the past and try to ban them to an inaccessible place from where they don't reappear to tempt and damage us again. Symbolically we do this in the Tashlich-ceremony but the honest process is much deeper and more painful than just throwing some crumbs to the fish. By asking the inconvenient questions, תשובה makes it possible that our future will not be dictated by our past. The result will be that we come closer to what we imagine of ourselves as our ideal self, enabling renewed and better relationships to ourselves, to our environment and to God.

At Rosh Hashanah we acknowledge God's majesty and authority over the universe. This helps us to realize that our illusion of having control over our past, present and future is just vain. The manifold symbols of Yom Kippur (fasting, Kittel, Vidui, Yizkor...) remind us of death, they confront us with our mortality, with our vulnerability and the impossibility of control, but also with the lasting value of supportive relationships.

The concept of תשובה offers a safe space for undergoing this painful process because we know as a basic principle of our culture that this is the right thing to do, and that this is a collective process, at least when it comes to the season of the High Holy Days (though repentance shouldn't be reduced only to this time of the year). It is not a return to a static point, to a previous stage of our life, but a dynamic process of trying to reach out to our better Self, which is an everchanging image because it interacts with our environment.

סליחה

Healing Broken Relationships

Learning to be able to forgive is important for one's own resilience, to acquire the capability of coping with being hurt and disappointed in life. Jewish tradition, especially prominent in the features of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation during the High Holy Days, requires of us also to accept the request for סליחה by someone who hurt us, even if we ourselves haven't reached yet a state of mind where we would be ready to forgive. We have to put aside our own strong Ego and our striving for justice and recompensation for the sake of a new beginning in the relationship with this certain person. The additional value is that we will also be liberated from being tied to the pain of the past and to a narrative which depicts ourselves as victims, thus crippling our ability to overcome this role and to become active agents in our own story again.

Trust in God and in a higher form of justice may help us to go beyond our personal limits. Psalm 104:35 states: יתמו חטאים מן-הארץ ורשעים עוד אינם, usually understood as: "Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more!", apparently calling for the destruction of the evil-doers. This is the sort of justice we hope for in our state of being hurt. But this is not the way of imitating God's grace and forgiveness. The story of Rabbi Me'ir and his wife Bruria in BT Berakhot 10a offers a different reading for this verse:

הנהו בריוני דהוו בשבבותיה דר"מ והוו קא מצערו ליה טובא הוה קא בעי ר' מאיר רחמי עליוהו כי היכי דלימותו אמרה לי' ברוריא דביתהו מאי דעתך משום דכתיב (תהלים קד, לה) יתמו חטאים מי כתיב חוטאים חטאים כתיב ועוד שפיל לסיפיה דקרא ורשעים עוד אינם כיון דיתמו חטאים ורשעים עוד אינם אלא בעי רחמי עליוהו דלהדרו בתשובה ורשעים עוד אינם בעא רחמי עליוהו והדרו בתשובה:¹⁰

According to Beruria's explanation one can read the verse in a way that the deeds, not the human perpetrators, should be eradicated from the earth, thus taking away the harshness of the decree. I find it helpful, for developing a readiness for forgiveness, to focus on the evil deed that can be abolished instead of ascribing to the sinner the evil-doing as an intrinsic characteristic.

We have no proveable knowledge about God but in an act of faith we believe that our own forgiveness is a mirror of God's empathy and patience with us. Forgiveness enables the

¹⁰ <http://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.10a>. Translation from www.halakhah.com:

There were once some highwaymen in the neighbourhood of R. Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. R. Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His wife Beruria said to him: How do you make out [that such a prayer should be permitted]? Because it is written Let *hatta'im* cease? Is it written *hot'im*? It is written *hatta'im*! Further, look at the end of the verse: and let the wicked men be no more. Since the sins will cease, there will be no more wicked men! Rather pray for them that they should repent, and there will be no more wicked. He did pray for them, and they repented.

perpetrator to change his/her ways but its healing qualities are noticeable also for us because granting forgiveness is an attempt of restoring ourselves, to reach what we would like to see as our true selves: being an image of God. Forgiving is the result of regaining sovereignty over our hurt emotions and enables us to gain a new perspective. It can even be for me a rather unilateral act of beginning to heal my wounded feelings, not necessarily depending on the repentance of the sinner. But for establishing a new relationship, for mutual completion and for the sake of a just social order, תשובה on the part of the other is, of course, indispensable.

7. גאולה

On Human Support and Divine Redemption

The seventh Berakhah of the Amidah is part of a redemptive process described by the Siddur in different stages and repercussions. Immediately before reciting the praises and petitions of the Shmoneh Esreh we remember the liberation from slavery in Egypt and call God גאל ישראל, the Redeemer of Israel in the past. The continued experience of God's redeeming power throughout history, as visible in the process of Enlightenment, of Jews obtaining civil rights and political equality and then also the founding of the State of Israel, led to a change of this chatimah in Reform prayer books into גואל ישראל, the Redeemer of Israel in the present. The idea of גאולה refers to redemption from political and social oppression, of Jews as a collective as well as of every Jewish individual in his/her personal life. It expresses the conviction that God stands at the side of the oppressed and gives them the strength to overcome this situation of distress and despair, externally by intervening in history and internally by giving power of resistance. Already in the second Berakhah גבורות this thought of divine help for those in dire straits is expressed in the description of God as סומך נופלים and מתיר אסורים - now this idea is broadened to include the collective, all of Israel, as individuals and as people.¹¹ In the fifteenth Berakhah of ישועה this thought will be developed into eschatological redemption.

The Berakhah for גאולה continues and crowns the line of personal petitions which mark the process of an inner growth from the insight into wrongdoing (דעת), performing repentance (תשובה), obtaining forgiveness (סליחה) and finally liberation through newly gained strength. Though this seems to be referring mainly to an individual, the chatimah makes clear that this person is seen and redeemed as part of God's special relationship with Israel. The covenant

¹¹ Since non-Orthodox Jews rarely pray the weekday Shmoneh Esreh, and the Berakhah for גאולה is not part of the Amidah on Shabbat and Holy Days, the authors of Reform prayerbooks wanted to ensure that this experience of ongoing historical redemption finds its expression in Liberal prayer practice.

safeguards the entire people, yet also each single Jew can rely on being carried by it through periods of personal hardship. By looking up to God, to the divine redemptive acts in history and presence towards Israel, the individual also may find strength to look for help and for inner resources to overcome an oppressive situation. As the verse in Proverbs 18:10 underlines:

מגדל עז שם ה', בו ירוץ צדיק ונשגב.¹²

I would confirm this out of my personal life experience: Whenever I had to face unjustified hardship and fights with other humans which seemed to push me down without leaving a way out, other people came to my help. They weren't fighting the fight for me, but through their solidarity and support I gained sufficient strength to face a complicated situation, to cope with pain and despair, to find a strategy how to get out of this distress or how to learn to live with it. I have always perceived this as more than just offering help, which should be usual in human friendships; there was more than human assistance: I could recognise God's intervention in this support by others.

8. רפואה

What Can Prayers for Healing Achieve?

During the past twenty years or so the communal Prayer for the Sick (מי שברך לחולים) has gained an enormous popularity in Jewish congregations from Reform to Modern Orthodoxy. There are probably several explanations for this:

1. As a central feature of congregational prayer it replaced the Kaddish Yatom, mainly near the end of services, which - as a new custom - was said by the entire congregation standing in respect and remembrance of the Jews who were murdered or otherwise perished in the Shoah. In the 1950s this prayer had risen to become an important feature of communal prayer liturgy because survivors in their congregations of refuge attempted to commemorate their lost family members, and also those Jews personally unaffected agreed on this new form of memorial culture, thus creating a coherence in Jewish identification with the victims and an attempt to perpetuate their memories.
2. When the survivors started to become scarce in the nineties and due to a worldwide developed culture of Shoah remembrance in the Jewish congregations, the commonly-said Kaddish Yatom was still preserved as a liturgical custom but lost its emotional effect. The euphoria about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War was very soon dimmed due to the incendiary effect of many local, now apparently uncontrollable wars and military conflicts in Europe (Yugoslavia) and elsewhere in the world (e.g. Rwanda and Sudan). People were bothered by the incalculable course of

¹² The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe.

history and the loss of hope in a New World Order of peace and cooperation, replacing the previous confrontation of power blocs. This induced a widespread withdrawal from optimistic hopes for a better world and a retreat into personal affairs.

3. The main thing in personal life, which despite all technical and medical progress, still remained uncontrollable was the issue of health and terminal illness. Though this fear since Biblical times had always been addressed by prayers (אל נא רפא נא לה as Moses' prayer for his sister Miriam) or later perpetuated by the Berakhah for Healing in the Amidah, a new minhag developed: the Hazan, the Rabbi or a prayer leader would say a communal prayer for healing as part of the Torah service while individuals would get up and mention publicly the names of their sick family members and friends. Traditionally this had been done in individual *Mi Sheberakhs* after an Aliyah for close members of the family only. Now the radius of those included into the prayer for healing was widened, thus reflecting a new definition of one's personal environment, including the "chosen family" of friends and colleagues in addition to the often emotionally more distanced biological family.
4. Catchy tunes for the *Mi Sheberakh* for Healing like that by Debbie Friedman or the different sung versions of אל נא רפא נא לה contributed to the spread of this new minhag.

Though as a congregant I partake in this celebration of the *Mi Sheberakh* and as a prayer leader I even try to stage it in an moving way, I have been very ambivalent about this. It is an old liturgical tradition that prayers which are said commonly by the entire congregation and in the presence of the Torah scroll have a special power in preventing a certain danger or life-threatening situation. This comes close to magic, and it is hard to withdraw from the maelstrom of this liturgical performance. But over the past five years I have witnessed the slow dying process through cancer of several friends, all of whom I had included into my personal daily prayers for recovery as well as into the congregational *Mi Sheberakh*. After each death I was not only affected by the personal loss and the deep fears of an own premature death, but also by the feeling of failure in praying. My prayers had been rejected or not fulfilled - or was it even worse: Could it be that there is a reverse magic, that whoever is included into my prayer for the sick, has to die - because this is what happened to all those friends I prayed for?! For a while after each death I didn't mention names in the Berakhah for *Refuah* in my daily Amidah and stopped joining the congregational *Mi Sheberakh*. In each case it has required a deliberate effort to rationalize the issue and to remind myself that prayer should not be confused with the idea of magic, where certain words and practices, exercised in a specific way, influence the course of the world.

But still I am left with the open question whether and how our prayers might have an effect on someone's healing process. Since our bodies are part of the natural world, my scientific

mind tells me that prayers cannot have an influence on biochemical processes within nature. However, my psychological knowledge tells me that prayers have a consoling and healing effect on my own soul, and also on the mental wellbeing of the sick person. Strengthening a person's optimism and willpower to survive and to fight the illness in one's body can be crucial for a healing process. But God? Can God really prevent or cure sickness? If a person survives and leaves the sick bed, all is fine. But what if there is no reversal of the terminal sickness? Do I have to assume that God didn't care for this person? Or that God decided it was good for this person to die? Thus I have the choice of the assumptions of either a) God's apathy, or b) God's cynicism, or c) God's lack of power to intervene. All three choices are frightening.

I have no answer. Instead I try to continue believing against all odds that, in each new case of a sick friend or family member, this time my prayer might help. Often prayer is for me the only possibility of expressing empathy and help, without knowing whether it has an effect or not. Maybe it is just a way to calm our fears. The only thing I know with certainty is that the terminal illness of my friends could not possibly have been a matter of Divine punishment for anything they did wrong in their lives. I refuse to relate to sickness and health as an expression of Divine judgement, as the consequence of a sinful or a just life.

9. ברכת השנים

Modesty versus Human Omnipotence

For me, living in an urban environment in Europe with plenty of rain in all seasons, the content of Birkat Hashanim seems to be disconnected from my daily experience. I do follow the orientation according to the climate conditions in the Middle East, for example by inserting the prayers for dew at Pessach or for rain in the winter season, as an expression of my attachment to Eretz Israel. But the sense of existential dependency on precipitation and on agriculture has been lost: I live in such a rich country which doesn't have to be self-sufficient - years of lower agricultural yields are compensated by importing food. My children don't know which fruits and vegetables grow in Germany and which are brought from the four ends of the earth, or how to ascribe certain fruits to their seasons, because they are available throughout the year in fresh or frozen state at the supermarket.

Thus this Berakhah is a reminder for us: for creating an environmental awareness but also to consider that praying and being grateful for a "good year" is not only dependent on the agricultural harvest. Sustenance (פרנסה) is crucial and it is hardly possible to realize a fulfilled life in a state of permanent lack of sufficient material means. But there is so much

that we cannot buy with money: happy relationships, a supportive partnership, children and their well-being, health, acknowledgment in our work, a stable and peaceful social environment. As Deut. 28:2-6 expresses an encompassing understanding of God's blessing:

13

ובאו עליך כל-הברכות האלה והשיגך כי תשמע בקול ה' אלהיך: ברוך אתה בעיר
וברוך אתה בשדה: ברוך פרי-בטנך ופרי אדמתך ופרי בהמתך שגר אלפיו ועשתרות צאנך: ברוך
טנאך ומשאריתך: ברוך אתה בבאך וברוך אתה בצאתך:

We ask God to give his blessing to our sustenance and well-being, and upon that we give him our blessing as a sign of gratitude: ברוך אתה ה' מברך השנים. Thus the entire ninth Berakhah is not just about rain and a rich harvest for its own sake but about the relationship between humans and God. Are we just a narcissistic species, able to cope with variations in nature due to our scientific and technical progress? Or are we still able to acknowledge that there is so much beyond our control? It is also about the allocation of our resources: Are we ready to share with countries and populations which are less fortunate in their climate conditions and the strength of their societies? Environmental catastrophes due to climate change happen, resulting in fatal destruction in the poorer areas of this earth: Will we take responsibility for this by a behavioural change in our own personal and social lives, thus allowing other nations to experience also that their years will be blessed by God?

10. קיבוץ גלויות

Reversing Cultural Processes: Assimilation to Judaism

Traditionally, the concept of the Return of the Exiled is a One-Way-Street: In messianic times all Jews, dispersed all over the world, will be gathered to Eretz Israel. Its secularized version, Zionism, has tried to achieve this goal through human effort, without waiting for this being part of an eschatological process. It took the issue of קיבוץ גלויות out of the religious realm; its success, the foundation of the State of Israel, poses thus before every Jew the constant question of the relationship between Eretz Israel and the Diaspora.

The immigration of Jews into Eretz Israel and the founding of the State of Israel enabled a historically unforeseeable process of reviving the Hebrew language and put Jewish tradition and ethics to a practical test. This is a vibrant, creative process, challenging all streams and

¹³ "And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out."

forms of identification with Judaism. The level of Jewish learning, debating and the acquiring of Jewish sources as means of guidance for the personal and the collective everyday life has reached a height it had never had before in history. Being enabled by Hebrew as a mother tongue, this learning is no longer limited to orthodox circles but has been embraced by secular and liberal Jews of all backgrounds, thus giving it a new direction and making it fruitful for the coining of Jewish identity in the future and of the character of the State of Israel, as long as it stays democratic. My belief is that the future of Judaism will be decided in Israel and in the United States, for only these two big centers of Jewish life will be able to develop and to shape productive answers for living Jewishly in a modern world. Only there will there be a critical mass of people and the learned capacity for a creative interaction between Judaism and the challenges of a non-Jewish world. In other parts of the world organized Jewish life in today's form of local congregations, social and educational institutions will gradually decline or disappear, except in some cities with a larger Jewish population. It will be replaced by translocal activities, gatherings and a wide range of internet-based learning and exchange.

However, despite the Biblical and the Zionist narrative, Jewish migration has never been a One-Way-Street of Jews focussing on and moving to Eretz Israel. Interestingly, the wording of the Berakha talks about the gathering of גלויות, not of an individual return to Eretz Israel but of entire collectives. Already at the time this prayer was formulated, large Jewish communities were living outside of the "Promised Land", in Alexandria, Greece, Rome, Babylonia. Apparently the existence of these populations and their institutionally as well as theologically independent structures were perceived as a challenge to a centralized, Temple-oriented Judaism in Eretz Israel. All these communities abroad had always been threatened by assimilation into the surviving culture, and in reaction to this danger they developed a stable core of institutions and of an identity which preserved Judaism as a viable culture against all odds. Mostly it was external political pressure, revolts, wars and persecutions which led to the dissolution of these Diaspora communities.

Today we live in a world of a constantly present cultural exchange and with a high mobility due to favourable political, economic and transport conditions. People don't spend their lives in one place anymore, it is quite usual to go abroad for studying, work, marrying, extended travelling and to come back after several years or to stay there or to move on to other places. Aliyah, the immigration of Jews into Israel, is paralleled by a constant stream of Israelis leaving the country temporarily or for longer, mostly for pragmatic and less for ideological reasons. An ideology of עולים versus יורדים will not in itself be able to define this phenomenon of natural mobility.

The process of gathering the exiles is part of an eschatological scheme. But instead of leaving it to Messianic times, I see there a very innerworldly task, especially for me as a Rabbi. I work in small Jewish congregations in Germany where I see very little chances for their existence in another fifty years. If it weren't for the State subsidies, most of these institutions wouldn't exist even now. The missing readiness of the members to sustain their community life is, despite historical and economic problems, primarily the result of a lack in identification. The Jewish identity of the congregants is mostly non-religious, it is just one among other personal and cultural identities, it is - apart from Anti-Semitism - not an issue that keeps the people up at night. Most Jews in Germany don't have a passionate answer to the question: Why should I be Jewish at all? Why should this be indispensable for my life, in the same way as a good school or piano lessons or a sports team for my children, or a new car and regular holiday trips for myself and my family? Why should I make the investment of time and money into Judaism a priority in my life? What will I gain from this?

I would like to reverse this process of acculturation: I want Jews in Germany to assimilate to Judaism. I don't want people to live an orthodox lifestyle, but I would like them to live according to the Jewish calendar, to experience Shabbat and Holy Days as something which structures their life in a positive way and can be filled with positive personal, communal and family experiences, not only connected to boring services or religious restrictions. There should be not just a vague feeling of Jewishness whose positive identification can hardly be passed over to the following generations, but instead Judaism can offer orientation for coping with the challenges of a highly individualized society, for experiencing a sense of community. Only a friendly, open, interesting, caring congregational life will make it possible for Jews to accept Judaism as relevant, to relate to it out of free will, not out of historical or family obligation. Only then might they become interested in investing in it, in learning Hebrew, studying Jewish sources and leading personally a Jewish life. A lively interaction with Israel and other Jewish cultures worldwide should be a part of this, and making Aliyah might become a consequence of it.

11. משפט

How Divine is Halakhah?

The eleventh Berakhah talks of the restoration of the jurisprudence of just judges of former times, not defining who they were or when they lived, to which ideal past we shall return in our search for a just society. The leitworte משפט (justice) and צדקה (righteousness) are mentioned in one breath with the acknowledgment of God's rulership, meaning that a just jurisprudence by human judges is not only experienced as juridical learnedness and mercy,

but as a consequence of God actually presiding over the case. When the Judean king Yehoshaphat appointed judges, he exhorted them:¹⁴

ראו מה-אתם עשים כי לא לאדם תשפטו כי לה' ועמכם בדבר משפט: ועתה יהי פחד-ה' עליכם שמרו ועשו כי-אין עם-ה' אלהינו עולה ומשא פנים ומקח-שחד:

If God is the authority for Jewish-religious jurisprudence, the chain of tradition goes back to the revelation at Sinai. We have to ask to what extent Halakhah as the search for the Divine will reflects the core values of משפט and צדקה. In the case of Halakhah משפט represents the “letter of the law”: all the legal sources, codes and commentaries from Sinai till today; צדקה stands for the “soft skills” of jurisprudence: taking specific circumstances, the change of the times and of societal norms into account - from Sinai till today. Orthodox Halakhah has focussed mainly on the משפט-Aspect of jurisprudence and refuses to give צדקה the same importance, by rejecting as authoritative all legal sources after the codification of the Shulhan Arukh in the 16th century. Non-Orthodox abolition of Halakhah is often motivated by stressing exclusively the צדקה-aspect, namely rejecting all traditional legal sources of משפט as time-bound and irrelevant, and wanting instead to be guided only by conformity to contemporary fashions and opinions. Both are human-made and form limitations in exploring and defining God’s will.

As a Reform Jew I don’t want to give up the concept of Halakhah, a structure which frames our understanding of Mitzvot, of being commanded by my belief and thus by Divine authority. Defining a certain Mitzvah is thus the result of exploring the values of משפט and צדקה together in a given case; failing to do the Mitzvah means to sin.

I find the four criteria for Reform Jewish observance helpful, which were formulated by the late HUC-teacher, Rabbi Jakob Josef Petuchowski.¹⁵

These are:

- a. What, in a given case, has been the main direction of the millennial Tradition?
- b. In what manner can I best realize the traditional teaching in my life and in the situation in which I find myself?
- c. What does the voice of my own conscience say?
- d. What is my responsibility toward the Covenant Community?

Within the coordinate system of these four poles I have to formulate my answer - and although I find myself often at a more conservative point on the spectrum of Reform Jewish

¹⁴ 2. Chronicles 19:6-7: “Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the Lord. He is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the Lord our God, or partiality or taking bribes.”

¹⁵ Jakob Josef Petuchowski: Criteria for Reform Jewish Observance, in: Heirs of the Pharisees, New York: Boine Books, 1970, pp. 167-179.

positions, my beliefs and actions are still coined by our Reform tradition of balancing out all these values and not prioritizing a single one of them. Thus I hope that the combination of משפט and צדקה, together with an awareness for the needs of the Jewish covenantal community, founded at Sinai, lets God's rulership and my acceptance of the עול מצוות shine through.

12. מינים

How to Face Religious Fundamentalism?

Liberal Jews have often felt uncomfortable with this Berakhah because it is directed against other humans and conveys a taste of intolerance and vengeance, contrary to a spirit of love towards all people. Therefore some recite it in an unusually low tone, and many prayerbooks have changed מלשינים into מלשינות, or רשעים into רשעה in order to clarify that the wish for destruction aims at the ideas and not at persons. I personally do not share these reservations, because I think this Berakhah has a lot of actual relevance and it is not about a philosophical dispute. Ideas don't exist on an abstract basis, they can be attacked only by attacking their carriers. The text of the Berakhah doesn't refer to "ordinary" sinners or criminals but to those who by their existence and their actions form an existential threat to Judaism and to humankind in general.

There are people who think that killing other people is what God wants of them, and these religious fundamentalists are around us and among us. In their religious zealotry they feel allowed to take other people's lives. In secular language these people are called "terrorists" - which is true but leaves their religious motivation out of consideration. I think that this is the biggest possible blasphemy: to kill the image of God in the name of God. But there is no justification for it, neither theologically nor morally nor politically. If this is true for contemporary religious terror groups like ISIS or Al-Qaida, then קל וחומר also for Jewish individuals and groups who claim that certain texts within Jewish tradition give them the right to burn down Arab family homes at night or to stab people to death at a Pride Parade. Regarding Islamist terror groups I can only pray that these will be brought to a halt, but regarding religious extremism among Jews I am compelled to act.

The problem of murderous fundamentalism in Judaism has long been ignored in recent history. There is a naive self-perception that we are the "good guys" and when cases of nationalist-religious homicide happened, such as the cases of Yitzhak Rabin, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, the Dawabshe family or Shira Banki, they were declared deeds perpetrated by individuals with mental problems. Among the national-religious audience, which was the

home of these murderers, there is no understanding that there is just a small step from denigrating verbal messages about “leftists”, Arabs, homosexuals etc. to carrying out a physical attack on representatives of these groups. Jewish tradition has always been quite ambivalent about religious zealotry: On the one hand Rabbinic literature has tried to emphasize the miracle of oil over the Maccabean wars as the justification for Chanukkah, or else fast days with the central features of mourning and repentance were decreed to remember the murder of governor Gedaliah or the civil war preceding the destruction of the Second Temple. On the other hand, Pinchas and his holy zealotry have been celebrated throughout history. When we study the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza as a metaphoric explanation for the national catastrophe, we must not overlook the problem that the silence of the rabbis was responsible for the escalation of the situation.

The return of the Jewish people to its Promised Land and the founding of the State of Israel pose a new challenge to Judaism. For the first time in history Jewish tradition has had to prove itself as viable not only for a powerless minority but as a guiding ethical system for a democratic state with a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic population. Will we be able to uphold the principle that everyone is created in the image of God? How can we make a distinction between the appropriate sanctification of God and the zealotry of the blasphemers who abuse religious devotion, places and symbols?

צדיקים 13.

On Community

It is very obvious that the Berakhah with the enumeration of just and extraordinary good people deliberately follows the previous exclusion of evil-doers, in order to create a contrast and a positive counter-image.

ברכה הסמוכה לחברתה - these two blessings are interactive: It is about “them” and “us”, what “they” are and what “we” are not, about fencing off and dissociation. But is the Berakha about צדיקים really inclusive? How can I identify with the list of this elite of the Jewish people? There seems to be an unbridgeable distance: the Just, the Pious, the Elders of Israel, the remnants of the Soferim, the righteous converts - individuals and leaders who in their virtues seem to be unattainable, those who taught Torah and took upon themselves Torah under often life-threatening circumstances. Who are they and who am I? The “We” (ועלינו) in the Berakhah seems just added as an easily comprehensible attempt for us to have a share in their reward of keeping Israel’s banner raised up and to inscribe us into this idealized depiction of Jewish history.

After stating who is included in that list of people for whose sake the Jewish people has been and will be preserved in past, present and future: Who is not there? Obviously missing are the Kohanim, those who represented the cultic aspects of Judaism, as a result of their failure to use religion as a positive and peace-creating force in times of civil war and religious strife. Also missing are all kinds of sinners and even the average people, you and me. Or are they included under the euphemism צדיקים, in the sense that it is said of Noah (Gen. 6:9): איש צדיק - "he was a righteous person in his times", meaning that "righteousness" is used as a relative term: We do the best we can? That would take away from this image of unattainability, putting an emphasis on what humans realistically can achieve in their lives, average people who struggle with the wide gap between the high claims for holiness and the reality of their lives. It may be that one can be called a Tzaddik who doesn't give up this daily fight: They are aware of this amplitude of failures and successes but at the same time want to hold on to Judaism as the guiding force in their lives and to maintain Jewish traditions in a world which offers many other attractive lifestyles and philosophies. The Tur in Orach Chayim 118 points out that the Berakhah on the Righteous contains all letters of the Alefbet:

יש בה כל האלפא ביתא, לומר למען צדיקים עוסקי תורתך עשה עמנו חסד.¹⁶

The all-embracing character of the Alefbet (symbolizing all of the Torah) is always a hidden hint that the literal enumeration is not complete. The list of potential Tzaddikim, for whose sake we ask God for mercy and a share in their reward, could be far more encompassing - maybe everyone except the מינים and evildoers guided by false religion?

This brings us to the question of community: Who constitutes the Jewish community and how can an inclusive community be built? The continuity of Judaism and Israel depends on the will to preserve the unity of the Torah, which is manifested in the diversity of the Seventy Faces of the Torah. Only the plurality of approaches offers every individual the possibility of finding in Judaism a matching concept for his/her life. Every Jew experiences כלל ישראל, all of Israel, mainly in the form of a concrete local congregation. Therefore a community has only a chance for cultural survival when it is able to integrate the plurality of Jewish expressions. A community will fail if it does not take into account all the different needs and perspectives of its members.

To illustrate this with an metaphor: People sit down at a table to eat together. The success of the meal isn't judged only according to the deliciousness of the food served (although this is the most obvious part of it); it depends also on the well-being of every single person around the table (who otherwise would turn out as a party-pooper): Was everybody part of the

¹⁶ Tur, Orach Chayim, 118:13. http://www.sefaria.org/Tur,_Orach_Chaim.118, 25. 8. 2016. "And it contains the entire Alefbet, and this means: For the sake of the righteous who occupy themselves with the Torah grant us favour/mercy."

conversation, were there appropriate seats and dishes for the children, were the serving bowls in reach for everyone, did people join in cleaning the table to alleviate the work for the host, etc. - this list could be continued. It was a good meal when everyone left the table strengthened and relaxed, with a warm satisfied feeling due to the food and to the company. Likewise in a Jewish congregation: The liturgy is not the only criterion for a successful service (albeit indispensable). Was everybody involved? Were the needs of the more traditionally orientated congregants considered? Could women and homosexuals also find themselves in the recited texts? Did the service start at an appropriate time for families? Were the parents aware that there are congregants who want to pray and listen to the drashah, and children's laughter and noise is not the non-plus-ultra for all? Are the facilities adequate for people with wheel-chairs and hearing-aids? Is there room for everyone, at least at some time?

There are many more criteria and suggestions for a sustainable community. It can succeed only if we serve the appropriate Jewish food for everyone and if people take responsibility for the cohesion of the community, even if they don't identify themselves with every group within it. A community with an exclusive, elitist ideology will not last long.

14. ירושלים

Place of Longing

”ואם אין לנו ירושלים ומלכות בית דוד, למה לנו חיים?”

And if we would not have Jerusalem and the House of David, for what should we live?”¹⁷

What brought the 18th century Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz, who in his lifetime never left Central Europe, to express such an existential longing for Jerusalem? He was no exemption, because the restoration of Jerusalem was the central feature of all hopes for redemption since the destruction of the Temple. Throughout the centuries individuals as well as small groups of Jews continued to make their way to the Holy Land. By settling in Jerusalem they tried to live their lives in the enormous tension between the city's reality of poverty and dirt and their inner imagination of a shining city with golden walls and towers. This phenomenon has continued ever since - even today one can feel in Jerusalem the fascination of this “already - not yet”, the promise of being close to redemption, the desire of the inhabitants of all faiths for a fulfilment of these dreams. In Jerusalem also the profane things have a different notion than these same issues elsewhere in Tel Aviv or Haifa. There is something special in the light and in the air of Jerusalem, a feeling of holiness, and even the secular

¹⁷ Jonathan Eybeschütz: יערות דבש (Sermon Collection), http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pagefeed/hebrewbooks_org_46192_639.pdf, 23.8.2016

inhabitants are proud of the sanctity of their city. One cannot escape being touched by the formative myths of Judaism and humanity which are present here: The foundation stone of the world (אבן שתייה), the drama of the Binding of Yitzhak (עקדת יצחק), Jeremiah's unheeded prophecies of despair. No wonder that there is a special syndrome bearing the city's name for people suffering from an overly-exuberant search for holiness. Even the traders in Machaneh Yehudah seem to sell their fruits and products with a pride in the immaterial additional values of their goods.

Though everyone is waiting for it, the city hasn't been redeemed yet. Jerusalem is a place of enormous tensions between several religious and ethnic groups among its inhabitants. Most people wouldn't dream of entering the neighbourhoods of the others; in times of crisis these are even cordoned off from each other by the military and by blocks of concrete. The Schechinah hovers above all this and shakes her head helplessly in view of all the religious narcissism in the town. She doesn't know where to dwell because no place offers sufficient peace to make it a sanctuary for all the nations. Redemption is a process of liberation and a return of holiness which takes place in a worldly reality and at concrete places. We have to work to make Jerusalem a common possession of all its inhabitants; only then will it be inviting for God to dwell in it anew.

And me? The laws of Sukkot operate with terms דירת/בית קבע (permanent dwelling) and דירת/בית עראי (temporary dwelling). We leave our permanent houses to live in a provisional booth to remind us that security and freedom is only granted by God, thus turning our temporary way of living into a spiritually permanent one, קבוע בלבנו. Jerusalem has been for me twice, each time for one year, בית עראי, but it has become בית קבוע בלבי. What makes me long for Jerusalem is not so much the Temple and the House of David, but rather the people I have met and to whom I am committed, friends and fellows in my studies and in the attempt to renew Judaism, their way of coping with a difficult reality, their striving for a better society, their creativity in formulating a Jewish language for what is going on and where shall we go, my longing for certain corners of the town, the sun, the food, the Hebrew language - human, urban and rural landscapes. Israel and especially Jerusalem has become a firm place in my outlook to the world. Although Berlin is currently where I have my apartment, my family and friends, my rabbinical work and the familiarity of my native language - mentally this has become בית עראי.

15. ישועה

Is There a Messianic Redemption?

In contradistinction to the petition for גאולה, this Berakhah for ישועה talks of a final redemption, a process at the End of Days which traditionally is described as being accompanied by the gathering of the exiles to Eretz Israel, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Temple service. This is an eschatological event which does not stop at the national level of Israel's redemption alone, but all peoples of the world will take part in it, the entire world will enjoy it and the Jerusalem Temple will be called a "House for all Nations" (Isa. 56:7). Traditionally the appearance of the Messiah, a person of Davidic descent, is linked to this period - not as the agent who carries out all these eschatological wonders but as himself a part of this Divine redemption process. Jeremiah 23:5 expresses this expectation:

הנה ימים באים נאם־ה' והקמתי לדוד צמח צדיק ומלך מלך והשכיל
ועשה משפט וצדקה בארץ:¹⁸

I find the idea that this future redemption will be personified by a male offspring of the House of David (who wasn't an ideal king himself) and that he will establish a kingdom (albeit of justice) not very appealing. There is the gender issue (why shouldn't redemption also be represented by a woman or a transgender figure?) and the image of a hierarchical social order in the form of a monarchy, but I would also argue that justice and righteousness aren't characteristics or capacities which are inherited genetically but have to be learned and acquired.

I understand the idea of a Davidic Messiah as a timebound and idealized human metaphor for the longing for an ultimate redemption. The idea that the Messiah is going to be a human, not an extraterrestrial being, resonates in me because it indicates the importance of humans taking a share in this redemptive process. Only when humans act in favour of establishing an order of justice and righteousness, these virtues which are rooted in God's rulership, will redemption have a chance to occur on Earth. Arthur Green described the messianic redemption as a culmination of Divine and human interaction, it will be the highest and ultimate expression of their partnership for the sake of Tikkun Olam. This is a utopian idea, but although utopian ideas seem to be disconnected from space and time, they may guide our paths in the Here and Now. We cannot know when the Messianic days will dawn - they

¹⁸ Jer. 23:5: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

will be initiated solely by God's unfathomable decision - but I am convinced that humans have to contribute to the final redemption of the world by pursuing justice and righteousness.

16. תפילה

Prayer as Submission and Alternative Reality

In their attempt to overcome the catastrophe of the חורבן, the total elimination of the sacrificial cult in one centralized place, the rabbis saw in prayers a substitution or even a replacement of the previous forms of devotion to God. It seemed to be a less-than-ideal-solution but at least they could also refer to the prophetic critique of sacrifices as an external, formalized expression of piety which was betrayed by its disengagement from ethical behaviour and a true submission to God. Consequently, the Reform movement in the 19th and 20th centuries removed reminders of the sacrificial cult and the hope for its restoration from its liturgy: The idea of humans offering material sacrifices of animals or agricultural products, and with God or the priests as His representatives devouring them, appeared to be only primitive. Prayer seemed to be the more humane and spiritual way of approaching God. It was also seen as more authentic because the praying person was required to put into words his/her relationship to God and to make approaching God a practice several times every day, not only on account of pilgrimages or special events. The titles of Reform siddurim reflect this perception: Gates of Prayer, עבודה שבלב (Service of/with the Heart), Mishkan T'filah (Sanctuary of Prayer).

Though Prayer was understood as the better form of Service, it could not answer the question whether God is impressed by it. Do our praises and thanksgivings provide God with satisfactions, will God grant us our petitions?

Throughout the period to the present diverse means were used in attempts to overcome this fundamental insecurity. There is the basic assumption from Tannaitic times till today that praying in community is more powerful and efficient than individual prayer. Orthodox Halakhah on prayer suggests that the observance of certain times, body postures (standing, sitting, bowing down partially or entirely, a defined number of steps into specific directions, leaning on the arm etc.), the compliance with a defined canon of preformulated texts, and reciting them in the correct Nussach and Cantillation melodies is crucial. This, however, makes liturgy into a means of magic to enforce the acceptance of prayer by God. Chassidic and Liberal Judaism preferred כוונה, the devotion of the individual, the enhancing of spiritual moments by music, meditation and the addition of personally-formulated texts as the right way of pleasing God and thus increasing the chances of the prayers being heard.

Though not obvious and blurred by these different approaches, this lack of certainty is still a direct connection between sacrifice and prayer. Moshe Halbertal points out that the potential of rejection is inherent to the sacrificial act:¹⁹ The Hebrew words for sacrifice מנחה (vegetable offering) and קורבן (animal offering) and especially the related verbs להניח (to lay down, to suggest) and לקרב/להקריב (to come/bring closer, to offer) reveal an insight into this mechanism: This act is an expression of a strict hierarchical relationship. The sacrifice-offerer cannot do more than make a suggestion - it is God who decides whether or not to accept this offer. There is this hope but no certainty. A sacrificial act is never a gift (מתנה) which is a way of improving the relationship between two sides of equal rank and grade, and which actually cannot be rejected. These aspects are also characteristic for the act of praying: We “offer” our prayers and the hope of them being heard and answered is part of our trust in God (אמונה).

If there is no confirmation about the efficacy of Prayer, then why pray at all? Talking to God is the main way of building up and maintaining a relationship with God. It is a way of acknowledging God’s existence and to find one’s own place in the created world. Thus it is mainly a submissive act, emphasizing the hierarchical nature of this relationship. That does not exclude talking to God in a conversational way but this is either a form of trying to keep God present in one’s life by ignoring the status differences from time to time, or it is a way of protest, of de-throning God after being disappointed by certain negative experiences in life and making God responsible for this.

Voltaire “God created man in His own image, and man returned the compliment”²⁰

Prayer is often about clarifying one’s own thoughts, a self-communication, an inner dialogue but it is more than just a psychological phenomenon of analyzing oneself. The major posture of submission enables a different perspective into the experienced reality, it opens up alternative ways for seeing one’s life. Without this external reference of talking to God this would remain in the category of self-admiration or self-pity. Prayers like Tahanun I have sometimes experienced as a way of a healing emptying of my Ego without falling into a void. And then praying is also an exercise in formulating petitions which don’t have a failure already built in, for instance not praying for a certain thing which can only be answered with “Yes” or “No”, but asking for a strength or a quality which enables me to overcome a difficult situation. That helps me to build up my capability to cope with problems and disappointments and allows a different outcome of a difficulty than originally envisaged. And praying helps me

¹⁹ Halbertal, Moshe: On Sacrifice, Princeton University Press, 2012.

²⁰ Quoted in: Romain, Jonathan: Really Useful Prayers, London: Movement for Reform Judaism, 2009, p. 22.

to grow beyond doubts, sorrow and anger because it includes the imagination of a different reality. Though not being a therapy it can have therapeutical effects. It does make me more stable, more self-aware and thus more open for the world around me. Praying in a community can make this process of individual clarification available as a group process, thus turning prayer into an experience of bonding and overcoming social isolation.

That still doesn't give a clear definition of the efficacy of prayer but such an attempt would come close to magic, to the idea of controlling and changing reality by certain spells and practices. I would side with the following poem which describes the power of prayer as strengthening our abilities to cope with reality:

“Prayer invites
God's Presence to suffuse our spirits,
God's will to prevail in our lives.
Prayer may not bring water to parched fields,
nor mend a broken bridge,
nor rebuild a ruined city.
But prayer can water an arid soul,
mend a broken heart,
rebuild a weakened will.”²¹

17. עבודה

Why Davvening at the Kotel is Part of My Reform Jewish Identity

“Who'd have dared shape the thought?
That we would come again to this antique rubble.
And that some definition of ourselves would grope its way forth
from these stones?
That there was a backbone to the body of our memories.
And that we could trace that backbone here
In this eroded rock?
That millenia would not rob us of the longing to stand here.
Precisely here.
And that sophistications would not free us of the need to exult here.
Just here.
By this bone of Jerusalem.

²¹ Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman, inspired by Abraham Joshua Heschel, in: Mishkan T'filah. A Reform Siddur, New York: CCAR 2007, p. 75.

With the gasp of a great horn filling our ears?"²²

Over the the past years I have been trying to come to terms with the place of the Temple in Jewish theology and contemporary reality. I would name three major experiences which characterise my thoughts on this issue:

First, I fully understand why progressive Judaism felt compelled to erase almost every mention of the Temple and the hope of its restoration from liturgy and theology. The idea that we could come back to a form of religious practice whose center is an institution, run by an exclusively male and hereditary caste, where spirituality is expressed by animal slaughter, seems to me frightening and not part of a redemption process. The Mishnah (Avot 5:8) describes it as a wonder that a woman never suffered a miscarriage despite the disgusting, ever-present smell of blood and flesh. I could never understand why one should pray for a return to these circumstances, and whenever I asked modern-Orthodox Jews about this I could get no more substantial answers than: "I share these concerns, but it's not my business, let the Messiah deal with it, meanwhile we say these prayers because that is what Tradition requires of us". During my frequent visits in Jerusalem, the Kotel was the least place to feel inspired and spiritually connected. Entrance to the women's section was allowed only after donning a *shmatte* and then, inside, every woman was praying alone, there was no feeling of community or common practice. After several attempts I gave up visiting the Kotel; spiritual experiences I had at other places.

Second, during the past three years I have been very committed to the fight of "Women of the Wall" - outside Israel by lecturing and writing about them, in Jerusalem by attending every month when possible their Rosh-Chodesh- prayer at the Kotel. In the beginning the trigger to go there had been a primarily political motivation: Fighting for religious pluralism and against the custom of Israeli politics to leave religion in the public realm to the ultra-Orthodox who have radicalized over the past decades and aim more and more at banning women from the public sphere. Defending such a prominent place as the Kotel against these tendencies seemed only be fair. Many secular Israelis and also Reform Jews from abroad did however question this commitment: "Why davka there? Religious pluralism is lacking at so many other places in Israel, too!" But according to the tactics of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance it is necessary to choose symbolic places to get more public attention and thus compensate for one's own inferior situation confronting the state and its instruments of power. Therefore the Kotel is exactly the right place, also for actions like Birkat Kohanot and other liturgical experiments. During the

²² Stanley F. Chyet, in: *Mishkan T'filah, A Reform Siddur*, New York: CCAR, 2007, p. 93.

Rosh-Chodesh-prayers I have often experienced blank hatred and an enormous amount of verbal and also physical aggression; sometimes it was not easy to get into praying mode. But already a few minutes after the start surrounded by other women who were determined not to be provoked, the prayer gained an intensity and a spiritual character which is hard to imagine, seeing the scenery from afar. Following these experiences I started to pray regularly at the Kotel, mostly at the southern, egalitarian part, alone or with other groups. And each time was special because once unmolested by spitting, cursing and whistling people, there is indeed a surplus of devotion (כוונה) and a sense of connectedness. I don't believe in the legend of the Shekhinah hovering above the Kotel and that one can have a better, closer access to God there than elsewhere in the world. I try to explain this phenomenon by a strong feeling of closeness to all the previous generations of Jews and to three thousand years of Jewish history for whom the Temple had been the center of identity, of religious practice and of politics, too. But is there more than this rationalization?

Third, on my way to a prayer of "Women of the Wall" in Chol Hamo'ed Pessach, waiting at the security check at the entrance to the Kotel Plaza, we were suddenly greeted warmheartedly by Rabbi Yehuda Glick, who was not yet then a Member of the Knesset and waiting for visitor groups for going up the Temple Mount. I thought to myself: How bizarre, doesn't he get it that we stand for different political and religious values?! Also our attempted Blessing of Priestesses could not be to his liking as an Orthodox Jew. But I had to learn that invitations had indeed been sent from representatives of these initiatives for Jewish prayer on top of the former Temple area. 'Why do you bother with all these insults and obstructions at the Kotel - come up with us and join us davvening at the real thing!' That was the point when I was convinced that, beyond all spiritual rapture, one has to develop a Liberal-Jewish theology towards the Temple which goes beyond the traditional Reform positions. In times when the Temple Mount is such a place of unrest and hostility as it is today, when political Islam claims to monopolize these grounds and while Jewish extremists already probe the reinstatement of the Temple cult by training Kohanim for sacrificing and other priestly duties, we have to clarify our own positions. Though most of these conflicts are political by nature, we must also find a religious language for addressing the Temple issue; just arguing with a rhetoric of Peace is not sufficient.

Interestingly, among the Mishnah tractates to which no Gemara was added by the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud due to a lack of practical relevance, were many which dealt with the practical upkeep of the Temple. Thus the Babylonian rabbis admitted already 1,000 years before their Reform colleagues that they had abolished the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple as a practical possibility. In an unexpected way Reform Judaism has been forced to deal with its relationship to the Temple and its remnants anew: Due to the

recent political success in the negotiations about the “Kotel Deal”, even if its implementation will still take a while, the non-Orthodox movements will soon administer an “own” part of the Kotel. So, what are we going to do with it? Of course, we can use it as a prominent place for services and life-cycle events where people are not gender-segregated, for open workshops on donning Tallit and Tefillin, with a visitor’s service which is friendly and multilingual. Different groups such as homosexuals, Ethiopian Jews or refugees might hold their own events there to make their presence in the Israeli society felt. But many of these issues would also be feasible at other places. We also need to develop a sort of a think-tank, a “Liberal Temple Institute” where we study tractates like Kodashim and Toharot with a Reform perspective or inquire into the powerful liturgy of the Temple and how elements of it could be made fruitful even today. What shall we do with the longing of two millennia for a rebuilt Temple, what do we share of this and what do we reject? How could a 'Temple for all Nations' function? Though this is more a mindgame for Messianic times, I would like still to focus more on one aspect which is often undervalued: The center and core of בית המקדש was not the 'sacrificing business' but the 'Holy of Holies'. This was a void, a room with practically nothing in it, but representing God’s presence in an extraordinary abstract way. This room was assumed to be so full of such a powerful energy called “holiness” that entering was allowed only once a year, only to the High Priest, and also this only after taking a lot of precautionary measures. Because it was of immaterial nature, this strong energy could not be affected by the destruction and the following erection of other buildings on these grounds. This holiness is still present and makes also a historically well-versed Reform Jew shiver today.

I’d like to frame my thoughts on the meaning of the Temple for us today by citing two poems. The poem of Stanley F. Chyet in the beginning describes the inexplicable charm and awe that this place still radiates which is hard to evade. The final poem by Sivan Har-Shefi meets my ponderings on the Holy of Holies.

כשנבנה את הבית²³

כשנבנה את הבית
דלתות ראשיות לארבע רוחות
חלונות לארגמן של שקיעה
לוורוד של זריחה

נותיר חדר אחד ריק
ובו נעמוד כל הימים

²³ סיון הר-שפי: "כשנבנה את הבית", מקובץ שירים "תהילים ליום רעש", הוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד, 2010

לא אסורים ברהיטים
קרובים זה לזה וזהובים
כנפיי עליך כנפיק עלי

והחיים ירחשו בחדרים האחרים
במטבח ובסלון
בחדרי הילדים
ויצהלו וירעישו ובהם נצמח

אבל שורשינו השקטים
מן החדר ההוא
והחום והאור והשבת

קרובים זה לזה וזהובים
פנים אל פנים
ברכה.

18. הודאה

Gratitude as Recipe for Happiness

If there were no institutionalized religion with forms of service, and prayer would take place only as a spontaneous invocation of God, most of these prayers would have petitionary character. We would turn to God mainly in situations of crisis or emergency, when things happen that make us cry for help. Therefore the 18th Berakhah is part of every day's Amidah, not only on weekdays but also on special days like Shabbat, Holy Days or Fast Days, for reminding us of the necessary inversion. We ought to put the pride in our autonomy aside and acknowledge God as the Owner of Heaven and Earth (קונה שמיים וארץ). The first prayer every morning, just after waking up and before we become engaged with the world is the מודה אני, expressing our sheer gratitude for being alive and having a new day ahead. In the מודים אנחנו of the Amidah we then express our awareness of and gratitude for all the small and big wonders happening around us "evening and morning and during the entire day".

The Berakhah on Thanksgiving follows immediately after the Berakhah on Service to God (עבודה), thus indicating the inner coherence of these two ideas. This prayer also shows that it retains the characteristics of sacrificial acts by establishing a cycle of return and mutuality: As thanks for the sustenance throughout the year, members of the agricultural society returned certain parts of the harvest or the flocks to the Temple, combining with this the hope

that these offerings would be accepted with favour and answered by a continuous flow of this cycle. So do we behave in prayer: After all the good things we have received from God, the only thing we can return is expressions of gratitude and the hope that through this gratitude we prove worthy to be further blessed.

The text of the הודאה doesn't mention us as subjects; it is all about our total dependence on God and God's good deeds, an unbridgeable hierarchy. This submission, expressed also by bowing down, seems to make us small, lacking in value and self-confidence. But the opposite is true: The hierarchical relationship to God remains but it allows us to leave our self-centeredness and liberates us from the destructive feelings of deficit and envy. By developing gratitude we gain a positive attitude to everything that is happening around us - and to ourselves, it is a recipe for happiness. Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life, it takes us away from focussing on the misdemeanours of our everyday life and keeps them in proportion. It makes us appreciate all the little things and turns what we have into enough, and more. Our ego can do without denigrating other people and their successes, we grow by bestowing appreciation upon others. Gratitude helps to preserve an amazement at all the little details and nuances, in nature but also in interpersonal relationships. Often we learn to appreciate things only when they are broken or not available anymore. Acknowledging that we are vulnerable and not in control of everything opens the walls that we have erected around ourselves to hide our dependencies and vulnerabilities.

Living in a world of prosperity, we have lost a sense for what our basic needs are. Our plates are full but people are not happy, often even depressed. Sometimes it is the friendly word of a person next to us that we miss most. We do best to remind ourselves what we are told:

כִּי לֹא עַל-הַלֶּחֶם לִבְדּוֹ יַחְיֶה הָאָדָם כִּי עַל-כָּל-מוֹצָא פִּי־יְהוָה יַחְיֶה הָאָדָם:²⁴

Discovering the daily wonders we are blessed with by God and responding to this richness with gratitude allows us to reach out to others and to let them also experience the extension of God's חסד.

19. שלום

Religious Leadership and Shalom

שלום seems to be the most encompassing quality that we may hope for. It contains the notion of living in prosperity and stability, more than just absence of war. It envisions a state of completeness, both on the social and the personal level, it refers to the inner and to outer

²⁴ Deut. 8:3. "(...) you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

world of humans, and it understands that Israel cannot live in peace if its neighbours or the rest of the world are in unrest. And unlike many of the other good things that we ask God for in the Amidah, it does not belong to the sphere of messianic hopes - we desire to live in peace here and today, and Jewish tradition made it clear that we have to work for it. Striving for שלום is unlike the other Mitzvot where we are requested to fulfil them at the time we encounter the opportunity to do them. About peace we are told that we have to pursue it actively and at all times:

הִלֵּל אֹמֵר, הָיִי מִתְלַמְּדֵי שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן, אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת
וּמְקַרְבֵּן לַתּוֹרָה.²⁵

Beyond the demand of constantly working towards peace and completion, we are told that this makes us into heirs of Aharon and the Priesthood in order to bring people closer to God and the Torah. And indeed, the idea of שלום is so closely connected to the priests that the 19th Berakhah is often called ברכת כהנים - obviously because the request to God to bestow peace upon us is preceded by the Priestly Blessing with the words from Num. 6:24-26:

יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ:
יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחַנֶּךָ:
יֵשָׁא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשֶּׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.²⁶

That echoes the fact that at the end of the morning sacrifices the priests used to bless the participants with these verses (in the evening there was no set sacrifice, and as for the afternoon, it was assumed that some of the priests might by this time be drunken from their Terumah-meal).²⁷ This was preserved in post-destruction synagogal liturgy by the minhag of *Duchenen* at the end of the Shaharit- resp. Mussaf-Amidah. At prayer times or in synagogues where this is not practiced, the prayer leader would insert a remembrance of ברכת כהנים, now also mentioning Mosheh as the one who transmitted this command from God to Aharon. Thus the circle of those “Peace-Blessers” has been broadened to include those who teach Torah, as pre-eminently represented by Our Teacher Mosheh (משנ רבנו).

Studying the history of the Second Temple, it does not seem obvious what destined the Kohanim to become symbols of Peace, despite the performing of the Priestly Blessing in the Temple and its Biblical roots. Rabbinical literature and sources like Flavius Josephus

²⁵ mAvot 1:12. “Hillel says, “Be of the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving the creatures and bringing them closer to Torah.” <http://www.sefaria.org>

²⁶ “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

²⁷ BT Taanit 26b: (www.sefaria.org/Taanit.26b; translation: www.halakhah.com).

רבי מאיר סבר כל יומא טעמא מאי לא פרשי כהני ידיהו במנחתא משום שכרות
“R. Meir holds the view that the reason why on ordinary days the priests do not lift up their hands at Minhah is because of the likelihood of intoxication.”

describe extensively how the priesthood failed to set an example for a life of peace and completion, how violence and even murder took place in the Temple, how corruption and hypocrisy began with the High Priest and went down into large parts of the priesthood. And this not as a result of individual failures but as inherent to the system, in the cultic field as well as intertwined into the political interests of the Jewish and non-Jewish rulers. If this was the reality, what brought later generations to idealize this period and to ignore the dark sides of it? Maybe this was the way how the rabbis expressed their critique: To construct a historical continuity by blurring or even reversing the historic facts, thus posing before us an ideal that we should indeed pursue?

But also the world of the rabbis was not an island of peace. The studying of Torah took place in a very competitive environment and by confrontative disputes. A Beit Midrash was not exactly a Spa, a place of wellbeing and striving for self-improvement, but rather a fighting arena. פילפול as a learning method favours a culture of strife and competitiveness. I sometimes wonder whether this learning practice, which promotes recognition of academic excellence and of being brilliant in “fighting back” by quoting other sources, is part of our fundamentalism problem today and the fact that Torah study (in its widest understanding) is reduced to a certain stratum of the Jewish society. The competitive character of traditional Jewish “Yeshiva” learning is either due to being rooted in a male society or the consequence of it. This makes Torah study an exclusive issue, not only in a gender sense but also by its prioritizing an exchange of logical arguments and quotes. What is for me the true purpose of Torah study, namely enquiring God’s will for the sake of the “education of the heart” is not really represented by it.

During the last year of my Rabbinical Studies in Jerusalem I also participated in the one-year-course סוגיות החיים at HUC where, under the guidance of Ruchama Weiss and Yonah Arzi, we studied texts from the Bible, the Talmud, of Chayim Nachman Bialik and other sources from the Jewish tradition and Israeli literature. The purpose was to train us to lead groups which focus on Torah study. A major lesson I took from this course was that text study and the method of Chevruta isn’t necessarily most productive when it takes place in a confrontative atmosphere. The outcome of the learning can be more sustainable when the study environment is very empathetic, asking first about the place in the world from where each of the participants approaches the texts (from whatever source it may be) and to help to bridge the gap between the text and me myself. Why am I touched by a certain aspect of the text, why do I focus on something which is not so explicit there, why do I remember a Biblical story in a certain way and overlook (deliberately?) other parts of it? Suddenly these are texts which are not hundreds or thousands of years old, in a strange language and style, written by unquestionable authorities, but they relate to something very relevant in my own

personal or social life, I can interact and enter into an exchange with them as if it were a talk to a good friend. This works in a totally different way than פילפול and halachic discourse could achieve; these texts become relevant and guiding for my life as no admonition with a finger pointing at me would be able to. In this course I acquired the conviction that there must be more and diverse methods of studying Torah than the competitive way. Maybe this would also lead to a realization of the bold exclamation of Rabbi El'azar that the students of Torah multiply peace in the world. I still want to hang on to the image of we rabbinical students and rabbis, that we do our job for the purpose of bringing שלום to the world:

אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי חנינא תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם שנאמר
(ישעיהו נד, יג) וכל בניך למודי ה' ורב שלום בניך אל תקרי בניך אלא בוניך
(תהלים קיט, קסה) שלום רב לאוהבי תורתך ואין למו מכשול (תהלים קכב, ז)
יהי שלום בחילך שלוחה בארמנותיך (תהלים קכב, ח) למען אחי ורעי אדברה נא
שלום בך (תהלים קכב, ט) למען בית ה' אלהינו אבקשה טוב לך (תהלים כט, יא)
ה' עוז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום.²⁸

Maybe the success of our intention to bring שלום to those whom we meet in our professional capacity, our capability to bless them with שלום and our messages of God, whose name is also שלום, will depend also on our didactic approach to Torah?

²⁸ BT Berakhot 64a. (www.sefaria.org/Taanit.26b; translation: www.halakhah.com).

"R. Eleazar said in the name of R. Hanina: The disciples of the wise increase peace in the world, as it says, And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children. Read not banayik [thy children] but bonayik [thy builders]. Great peace have they that love Thy law, and there is no stumbling for them. Peace be within thy walls and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions' sake I will now say, Peace be within thee. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God I will seek thy good. The Lord will give strength unto His people, the Lord will bless His people with peace."