Conversations with God:
Insights from Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov's Likutei Tefillot

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By Cantor Alison Wissot
Dr. Eitan P. Fishbane, Advisor
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Introduction
The Challenge of Talking to God

Adonai, s'fatai tiftach... God, open up my lips that my mouth may declare your praise. The very centerpiece of Jewish prayer, the Amidah, begins with a prayer for prayer. Nearly every siddur written seems to contain just such a preface: how does one begin? Why should there be a need to pray in order to pray?

"The Jewish myth is one in which the verbal has a unique and almost all-powerful position."[1] The world itself was created by words; it is God who sets up the word as the very foundation of our world. Therefore it should be no surprise that the discussion about the words used to approach God is vast and in-exhaustive.

But how does the pray-er begin? Which words do they need to use? What should they be thinking about during our worship? What do they do when other undesirable thoughts enter their minds? These questions and so many more will never be conclusively answered, so our aim here is not to attempt this impossible task. Instead, this paper is an exploration of the private prayers of Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, with the goal of deriving insight into how private prayer might be approached today.

Until Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, the discussion of the power of words revolved around "the prescribed holy word of liturgical devotion."[2] These words were not impulsive but planned out, spoken beforehand and by everyone else. But with Rabbi Nahman, spontaneous prayer takes on distinct importance. For him, "the true core of religion is that struggle for faith which goes on in the heart of the individual believer –

[1] Green, *Tormented Master*, p. 147.
[2] Ibid.

that essence of prayer is *hitbodedut*, the lone outpouring of the soul before God."[3] It must be noted that liturgical prescribed prayer remains fundamental to Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav; in other words, private prayer involving the outpouring of one's heart does not at all replace public communal prayer. While the prayers of the synagogue, primarily public worship, were set forth directly so that people might know how to proceed, the private prayers of the heart were left to the individual. Thus, the structure, intention, and the goals of public and private prayer are necessarily different.

Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, one of Rabbi Nahman's main disciples, composed a series of private prayers called *Likutei Tefillot*. These prayers themselves constitute an approach to private prayer, in which he lays out his own ideas for how to conduct oneself in those moments when one stands alone before God. It is clear that he wrote these for himself; the prayers recorded in Likutei Tefillot were the outpourings of his own heart. He published them in order for people to have a guide to this kind of worship, not for them to recite verbatim, unless they could not find their own words. But these were not an unplanned, random set of thoughts. This extraordinary work is based on Rabbi Nahman's *Likutei Moharan*, which is in turn based on Rabbi Nahman's teachings of Torah. Rabbi Nahman taught that what God desires most of us is for Torah to be transformed into prayers[4], and thus Rabbi Nathan's project was undertaken. It is on this collection of Torah-prayers that my work will focus.

I will first present a brief history of Jewish mystical approaches to this kind of contemplative prayer, (chapter 1). While this paper will focus on private prayer as seen through the work of Rabbi Nathan, I will also utilize several other important works on

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[3] Ibid., p. 3.
[4] *Likkutei Moharan*, II, 25. See Lamm, p. 186, "Prayer and Torah."

prayer: Siddur Limot Hachol, (written by a Bratzlav Hasid basing his work upon the traditions of the Master); *Seyder Tkhines*, the women's prayer-book; and the modern work of Rabbi Naomi Levy, titled *Talking to God.* Chapter 2 will deal with the *keva* of this prayer, and whether structure impedes or assists the private outpourings of the heart. Specifically, we will examine the relationship between *Likutei Moharan* and *Likutei Tefillot* to see how Torah is turned into prayer in Bratzlav Hasidism. Chapter 3 will explore the *kavanah,* or inner intention, of private prayer in relation to public prayer. Chapter 4 will approach the question of to whom prayer is directed; in other words, how these authors name God. Finally, the conclusion will attempt to discuss how to teach private prayer to our communities.

It is my hope that this thesis will further the discussion of personal prayer, and will lead us toward an understanding of how to inspire individuals to develop their own voice in which they may talk with God. It is also my hope that the problem of our lack of private connection with God can be called into the forefront of our religious lives, so that together we can address this major issue. Once we lighten from synagogue worship the deep need human beings have to talk privately with their Creator, we can make room for the other deep needs synagogue worship should and can fulfill: connection with community and the continuity of values, morals and ideals of our tradition through the generations and throughout the world.

Chapter 1
A Brief History of Jewish Mystical Approaches to Prayer

Throughout the span of Jewish history, seekers of God have sought answers to the everlasting question: how does one approach God?

> "'Take with you words and return to God.' (Hosea 14:3) God said to them 'I ask for words. Cry and pray to Me, and I will accept your prayers. Was it not through prayer that I redeemed your forefathers, as it is written 'And the Children of Israel sighed because of the work and cried out' (Ex. 2:23) Was it not through prayer that I worked miracles for them in the time of Yehoshua? I don't ask for sacrifices, only words.'"

Once the Temple was destroyed, words became the only way to approach God. For the mystics, prayer thus became the central focus of religious life. For like the smoke and incense of the sacrifices, words have been endowed with the power to reach upward, and in their ascent to connect human beings to the creator.

Because worship for the mystic was central to religious life, mystics struggled with the proper way to pray. Different sects, teachers, and time periods produced varying answers to the questions of the proper intention during prayer, the structure prayer should follow, and the particular words necessary. On the other end of the relationship, mystics developed theories and beliefs about the affect of prayer on the Divine.

Discussing five major types of mystical prayer will enable us to understand the direction contemplative prayer has taken. We will examine some representative texts of each of these types: we will look at early kabbalistic thought; Sefer HaRimon and the Zohar (Moshe deLeon); Tola'at Ya'akov (Meir Ibn Gabbai); Sefer Pardes Rimonim (Tefillot Moshe, by Moshe Cordovero); Lurianic Kabbalah; and the Hassidic teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, and his student, Nathan of Nemirov.

For Bahya Ibn Pekuda, a Jewish-Sufi pietist of the eleventh century, the importance of the precise words of prayer demanded a rising focus on interiority. It was not that the liturgy needed to be changed, but that the inner life of the person reciting those prayers took on a dimension all its own. Intention thus took on a heavily important focus. Each word held specific intentions that were necessary to direct one's mind upon if prayer was to be accomplished fully; prayer became a contemplative moment based on various aspects of the Divine.

For Moses deLeon writing in 1290, theurgical influence, the process of actually transforming the Divine, was central to the ritual act of prayer. His ideas come at the end of a century of kabbalistic creativity, in which early kabbalists began to rely heavily on the text itself. "It is the act of mental intention in ritual that is considered to have theurgic force."[5] But not only this; the words themselves take on this ability. This is according to the particularly empowering idea that human prayer empowers God, and thereby sustains the entire cosmos. The words themselves were associated with the sefirot, and could bring about different actions and balances within God and the world. The goal was to bring on the divine flow, the *shefa,* and to maintain that emanation from God into the world. "The human voice is given physical form as a prayerbreath in resemblance to the sacrificial smoke;"[6] that is to say, word, voice and intention all take over where sacrifice left off, and provide a concrete way of approaching God.

All this is very different from Maimonidean thought, where prayer and kavanah do not transform God, and in effect can be seen to have no real effect on God. Kavanah for the Rambam is a process of clearing one's mind, relieving its weariness so that prayer

[5] Fishbane, "Contemplative Practice and the Transmission of Kabbalah" p. 148.
[6] Ibid., p. 150.

can take place in the proper state of mind. So while there is an emphasis on the importance of an interior state, this state is something quite different from the mysticism of Moshe deLeon. However, deLeon's work in Sefer HaRimon shows an internalization of Maimonidean rhetoric of the un-knowability and un-reachability of God in the idea of sod or *raza*, the secrets pervading the universe.[7] There is a hidden layer of meaning to everything in this tradition; and the esoteric meanings are passed down through this secret chain of being. Only in this way are the kabbalistic intentions to be understood.

These theurgic principles are understood by the *mekubalim* to be the authentic chain of tradition, which is embedded in rabbinic and biblical texts. The verbal act becomes the internalization of the now extinct ritual of sacrifice, which preserves these *korbanot* and simultaneously transforms their role in the life of the mystic. The symbolic interpretive approach to the text is that which itself draws down the Divine *shefa*; this text is enacted or performed through ritual, and the interpretation itself is a type of meditation or contemplation that forms the mystical practice.

For example, "*uvacharta et Adonai Elohecha*," traditionally understood as "you will choose *Adonai* your God," becomes radically understood in the following way: through *brachot*, the human being stimulates the divine flow. It is not that we choose God, but through this act of prayer we physically cause a reaction in God, which in turn draws blessings down upon the world, which in turn causes us to bless, which is the drawing of blessings back up to the supernal worlds. The *bracha* becomes like a *b'reicha*, an overflowing pool, on both sides, upper and lower. One flows into the other which flows back into the first, and this process sustains God and the world. Through

[7] Certainly, this unknowability of God manifests itself in a parallel way among the kabbalists. God is beyond the limits of the mind. Yet, the mystics were consistently drawn to contemplate the Divine.

this process, the human being actively sustains the cosmos; the human being is empowered to rupture or heal the Divine, and thereby the world.

Moshe deLeon's *Sefer HaRimon* expresses a layered notion of ritual, in which the exterior part is either sacrifice the substitute for the sacrifices: verbal prayer. The interior, the *sod hatefillah* or secret of the inner life of the prayers, is a particular form of *kavanah* or intention. For deLeon, this intention *is* the action itself; the dichotomy between thought and action in prayer is dissolved – thought is action, and the action necessary is particular and directed thought.

In the *Zohar*, also a work of deLeon along with fellow kabbalists, other imagery is particularly illustrative. The *Shema* is the process of unification of the Divine by human beings. This recitation causes one light to go forth out of the hidden-ness; this primal singular light smashes into the primal darkness and breaks into colors, into seventy lights, which break into seventy branches of the *Etz Chayim*, the tree of life. This is the direct fusion of action and intention; by saying God is one, we literally make God one.

The imagery is distinctly sexual. When Israel says "*Adonai Echad*," this awakens the six middle sefirot which unite above and enter *Shechinah* as the divine phallus. Meanwhile, the female is also readying herself. All limbs of the supernal body become aroused in desire for their lover.[8] This imagery of romance and sexuality, of the sacred marriage, is the ultimate drama of human sacred ritual arousing the Divine realm.

The system of Divine structure here is implemented in a practical way: the parts unify to become one, and the exterior words and the interior focus combine to create supernal balance. Thus we see unification and theurgic principles as definitional of this form of mystical prayer.

[8] Sefer HaZohar, Terumah, p. 119

For Meir Ibn Gabbai, a mystic of the 13th century, the main mystical experience is also of theurgy and unification, though the images present themselves in different ways. The *tola'at*, the silkworm, which can make a substance from within itself, is a metaphor for the idea that God makes the world in this way, by Divine emanation.[9] Ibn Gabbai's work is a radical undermining of literalism; the texts mean more than the words at hand, and the task is to decode the ideas in a given prayer and utilize the right kavanah in their recitation. For example, the *Barechu* is itself not just the call to worship; it is the very drawing down of the divine *shefa* from the source, the *ein sof*, to the *Shechina*, who here is called "*Et Adonai*." The Shechina, *hakallah haklulah min hakol*, is the bride composed of everything in which everything is gathered. The word *et* represents *Alef* to *Taf*, the totality and very fabric of being of *Adonai*. In the next phrase, Baruch represents the *ein sof* or the top three *sefirot*; *Adonai* is the *kav haemtzai*, the middle six *sefirot*; *Hamevorach* is the male dimension of *Yesod*; and *L'olam Va'ed* is the *Shechina* herself, the throne of glory. With the recitation of these words, the *shefa* is brought ever closer, and God thereby becomes closer to unification.[10] This call to worship, then, means that both sides are in fact being called; the people of Israel and God are perceived to be embracing.

Other important imagery in this work consists of branches and lights. There are seventy branches interwoven that grow out of the *kav haemtzai*, and in direct parallel, the Torah flows forth with seventy faces.[11] The pluralistic hermeneutic comes from the plurality of dimensions within the one God. However, it is important, as we see with the Shema, not to sever any one of the branches from the others or from the source.

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[9] *Tola'at Ya'akov*, Sod Bar'chu, p. 37.
[10] Ibid.
[11] *Tola'at Ya'akov*, Sod Kriat Shema, p. 41.

When Israel focuses and has the proper kavanah toward *yichud lemata*, unification below, all the lights unite (sefirot being the radiant dimensions of divinity) and *Tiferet* unites with *Shechina*. The male and female unite in God, causing the unification of the world itself.

The third type can be seen in Cordovero's work in *Sefer Pardes Rimonim.* While this text appears in the sixteenth century in Sfat, it is still considered to be pre-Lurianic Kabbalah. His work is a culmination of the theology of the ten sefirot, a coalescence of the disparate writings into a highly systemized thought. For Cordovero, all of reality is the great chain of being that IS *ein sof*; the *sefirot* are the vessels by which God's transcendent oneness becomes manifest. We see a focus on *atzmut* and *keilim*, the essence and the vessels, and a deciphering of whether the *sefirot* are actually part of God in an instrumental sense, or are in fact essential. In this mystical experience, there is an awareness of God's infinite un-knowability, a direct lineage from Maimonides. There is an attempt to articulate the balance between a particularity of focus and the ultimate unity of the sefirot. The truth the kabbalist sees between the manifold and the one, their belief about the metaphysical world, is reenacted and concretized.

Cordovero's approach to prayer and *kavanah* can be clarified by visualizing the image of clear water flowing through different colored vessels, or the pure light of the sun as it flows through colored panes of glass. The light has not changed; it is still the essence of pure light or water. But the perception will be different depending upon the particular pane or vessel. Here, the light or water is the *atzmut*, the essence of the *ein sof*, and the colored panes or vessels are the sefirot themselves. The mind, being limited and incapable of understanding the *ein sof* directly, contemplates this infinity through the

sefirot, as if instead of seeing the water or light itself, it perceives the colored vessels or glass. Through those colors, the mind is actually perceiving aspects of the Divine.

Another image that relates directly to the spiritual practice here is that of the tetragrammaton. The four letter name of God, itself, represents God's totality. But with the *nkudot* of vocalization, this name represents the individual sefirot as they are unified together. Thus it represents both the entire structure and the parts, the totality and the prism through which it is seen. Ultimately, the practice is to contemplate "*eilav, v'lo eidotav*," the whole *ein sof* and not its parts. But the mind seeks to place limits on the un-limitable, and while we cannot think that the sefirot are the essence, the *etzem* of God, we perceive God through these limited sefirot.[12]

The practice of the kabbalists involved using the vocalization of God's name to focus the intention. With different vowels, the four letter name of God could be pronounced differently, representing various sefirot. *Kavanah* is thus the "*hevel piv*," the mist of the words concretized into *ruchaniut*, the spiritual realm. It is the process of creating the letters on high, creating the world on high, which in turn creates the lower world, which then creates the upper. Thus the theme of theurgy, and of the interdependence of the supernal and lower worlds, is reestablished.

Lurianic Kabbalism of 16th century Sfat represents yet another view about *kavanah*. Lawrence Fine explains that sadness in prayer was to be avoided, and that the "attainment of the Holy Spirit," one of the most important goals of prayer, "depended

[12] There is a debate about this expressed by schools of kabbalah, the essentialists and the instrumentalists. The essentialists "believe that the Sefirot are God's essence." (See David Ariel, *The Mystic Quest*, p. 68-9.) This is how they dealt with the problem that the sefirot could be perceived as different from God, and therefore the issue of potential idolatry is resolved. The instrumentalists on the other hand deal with the issue of God's changeability. God is infinite and unchangeable, and so with this theory, God's essence remains unchanged while the sefirot can be perceived in a multiplicity of ways.

upon joyfulness, both while praying and while performing the mitzvot more generally." (227) This joyful intention even translated into a relationship with one's companions; in fact, the worshipper was directed to prepare for prayer by declaring his love of these companions. But this joy should not be expressed in a loud manner. The sound of the human voice could be a problem for the intention of the worshipper, as it could prove to be distracting. Fine explains that worship according to Luria should be whispered, not spoken loudly, in order for the voice not to compete with the inner intention.

Lurianic Kabbalah depended upon multiple specific *kavanot* for every prayer, and thus each worship experience was an intertwining of the fixed prayer and fixed particular intentions. This interdependence is developed in another way in Hasidic prayer of the eighteenth century. No longer do we find the same kind of emphasis on direct theurgy. Hasidic prayer and fosters an ideal of simplicity.[13] That is not to say that Hasidism demands less of the worshiper, although it does simplify the complicated and specific *kavanot* that must be utilized in earlier kabbalistic prayer. Instead, it focuses upon the fact that everyone has access to the service of the heart, everyone has access to a conversation with God. As Green and Holtz put the matter:

> "Since all of Creation is filled with God's Presence, there is neither place nor moment that cannot become an opening in which one may encounter Him. Hasidism thus teaches that all of life is an extension of the hour of prayer, and that prayer itself is the focal point around which one's entire day is centered."[14]

With Hasidism, we see a dramatic move toward a more psychological form of spirituality, where *ayin*, nothingness, is transformed into a category of human consciousness. The theology is of immanence rather than transcendence: the themes of

[13] Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 7.
[14] Ibid., p. 7.

pantheism and panentheism, where God fills the world or in fact is the whole world, abound, as opposed to the idea that God stands beyond the world. Finally, there is a greater accessibility in this mystical experience; everyone, not just the elite, should strive for *dveikut*, the cleaving to the Divine. Hasidic thought reaches toward profound simplicity that is available to all. There are certainly some who are more qualified than others; some are able to reach higher planes within this process, and it remains unclear as to the degree to which Hasidic spirituality was populist in nature. However, it is clear that Hasidic prayer is no longer the end of a series of mathematical acrobatics; and yet, it is not that this practice suddenly becomes easy; it is only that its esoteric quality has been stripped away, and the teachings take on a more popular attitude.

In contrast to the previous kabbalists, for whom the goal was locating the keys to unlock the *sod*, the secrets of the Divine, for the followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht), the lock is protecting the human heart, and it needs to be smashed and broken open in order to allow for God's presence.[15] Another interesting image comes from Genesis, the story of Noah. In the Biblical story, Noah is commanded to make a window in the ark; the Besht plays with the fact that the word for ark, *teivah*, also means "word." His reinterpretation is as follows: one must either make a window in the word, or create that window for the word to enter. Through that opening, the divine light can shine into the individual. In practice, the worshipper begins by focusing intently upon the letters. Once he has entered into the letters themselves fully, he will be transported past them, to the point at which the text begins to disappear before his very eyes. This is the way in which the worshipper loses himself in *tefillah*.[16]

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[15] *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, Amud HaTefillah, no. 48, p. 118.
[16] Ibid., no. 14, p. 104.

Prayer is certainly at the core of life for the Besht and his followers. He said of himself that "the reason why the supernal matters were revealed to him was not because he had studied many Talmudic tractates and Codes of Law but because of his prayer. For at all times he recited his prayers with great concentration."[17] But Louis Jacobs points out that Hasidic prayer is full of contradictions. One the one hand, in this kind of contemplative prayer, the goal is *bitul hayesh*, "the annihilation of something-ness."[18] If prayer is "an exercise in self-transcendence,"[19] then what do we do about petitionary prayer? "Consciousness of need implies self-awareness"[20] which negates the ability of the self to meld into the Divine. So Hasidim developed a "quietistic and radical way out of the dilemma... that petitionary prayer is not, in fact, a request to God to satisfy man's needs but to satisfy His own needs."[21] That is to say, God prays through our prayers. This type of prayer renders the individual extremely passive, a theme that is found throughout Hasidic practice; but it also directly involves the human being in relationship with the Divine.

In practice, we see an emphasis on the banishment of *machshavot zarot*, foreign thoughts, thoughts of a sexual nature, and other distracting thoughts, and the transformation of these into the love of God. The task is to find the fallen sparks and redeem them, a concept essential to Lurianic Kabbalah. With this understanding of *machshavot zarot*, there is too an understanding of human nature and the reality of the struggles inherent in prayer. This can be described in terms of *katnut* and *gadlut*, the process of going from a simplistic, childlike limited state to an expansive one. There are

[17] Wineman, p. 330.
[18] Ibid., p. 334.
[19] Ibid, p. 335.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, p. 145.

distinct steps of spiritual practice, whereby one climbs to greater levels, and sometimes falls back into lesser ones, and the way to get back up, as it were, is through the language of prayer itself.

Furthermore, God is to be worshipped in every aspect of life: *avodah b'gashmiut*, in corporeality too. Even so, the goal is to move from *yesh* to *ayin*, from something to nothing, to the total loss of self, to transcending the senses, and from physicality to total spirituality. One wishes to separate the "accidents" of the body from the internal spiritual process and to become a vessel for the divine.[22]

Some of the images most poignantly expressed here are as follows: that a person should be like a *shofar*, a passive vessel for the *Shechina* to utilize in order to make her sounds. One should thus experience the Divine coursing through the self. The kavanah is that the divine is speaking through the human being; and without it, one would be unable to speak.

There is also the image of the word as a spark or ember; when one correctly places the intention, one word illuminates another, which then sparks another. Even if there is one tiny thought that cleaves to the Creator while the rest are unable to do so, the coals can be fanned and a spark can ignite to allow an even greater and more powerful connection.

Let us examine a selection from *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov* that will illuminate for us the process of Hasidic prayer.

> "And when you fall from the level of this tefillah, say the word with a small intention according to your ability, and after that, strengthen yourself in case you have to return many times to this level. From the beginning cleave to the body of

[22] *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, Amud Hatefilah passage 48, p. 118.

the word, and after that, the word will have soul or breath; and it needs to awaken itself from the beginning with all your strength, in order to shine in it the power of the soul, as it is described in the Zohar, that a fire that was glowing but has dimmed will shine, and after that you will be able to worship without a thought to the accident and movements of the body."[23]

This passage begins with an assumption that at once is daunting and comforting: it is inevitable that the one praying will fall from whatever high levels of worship attained. It is daunting, because the idea that one cannot stay at the depth at which one might arrive, after all the struggle and intensity to get there, is disappointing at best and highly frustrating. It is comforting, in that anyone who has prayed knows that there is an ebb and flow of one's thoughts in prayer, and because we all know that reaching a high point is not only not a guarantee of staying there, but is almost certainly the opposite, a guarantee that one will fall a great distance. To have the Master here, the one who is supposed to be the expert, discuss this problem in an open and honest way, means that there is a chance for the rest of us to achieve some sort of connection to God, and some sort of heights in prayer. The casual way in which this assumption is phrased, "when you fall, here's what you do..." allows the pray-er to move beyond the fear, and enter into the practice, the work that is required during worship.

The practice exemplifies the simplicity of the Hasidic movement. The worshipper begins by simply focusing on the word, with whatever ability he has at the moment. His job is to accept where he is; not that the goal is to stay there, but it is a recognition that the only way to take a journey is to first place one's feet somewhere, anywhere, and only

[23] Ibid.

then to walk. One has to start somewhere, even if one is initially lost; by accepting where he is and focusing upon that with strength and ability, it is impossible to remain lost.

That process of finding yourself allows you to "strengthen yourself to return," to climb a bit, even if you find yourself falling back down onto the same level! Here again, there is a realization of the humanity in this process, that humans are not God and most of us are not incredible *tzaddikim*. Human beings are lacking. We will continually fall, as a baby does when learning to walk. But that does not mean reaching itself is wrong. The very process of reaching and falling, reaching and falling, cleaving to the task itself (in this case the very body of the word), is what gives the task, or the word, a soul, breath, possibilities and potential. Meanwhile, the word itself is our tool in this process. The word is what carries us, carries our intention, and allows us to make that window, so that the divine might find its way inside our own souls.

Once the word has a soul, the process continues to arousing the physical, *l'orer*, with all the strength of the body, so that the soul of the word has a place to shine. It is not that one must disregard the body, but pass through it, in order to reach the level when the body is no longer of any importance. The physical is not to be denied, but it is necessary. It is part of the way in which one enters into *dveikut*. Once you get "there," you find yourself beyond the need for language, beyond the need for the body. It is, while not an endpoint, a doorway.

One might imagine that this whole process is a cyclical one, falling and climbing, reaching toward relationship with God, and then becoming aware of one's human physical form once again. This provides a sense of optimism. Even those who reach the

highest levels need to continually go through this process; it is just the nature of the journey, and therefore nothing to become distressed about.

Key ideas and terminology throughout this passage are: *lahzor*, the process of returning; *madreiga*, the levels of climbing and falling; *ydabek*, the goal of cleaving to God; *guf hateiva*, the physicality of the letter and the word; *l'orer*, to awaken the physical process in prayer; and the *d'lik*, the ember, that allows for all this to take place. For if there is but a little spark, there is the ability to fan that spark into something ever greater. If there is but one little connection to the Divine, there is an ever growing potential for true *dveikut*.

The Ba'al Shem Tov's great grandson, Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, furthered and transformed these ideas. For Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, "the true core of religion is that struggle for faith which goes on within the heart of the individual believer... [and] the essence of prayer is *hitbodedut,* or lone outpouring of the soul before God."[24] That prayer, according to Rabbi Nahman, derives from Torah. The greatest task a human being can accomplish, he felt, was to turn words of Torah into words of prayer. Nathan of Nemirov, Rabbi Nahman's exemplary student, followed and developed these beliefs, and so Likutei Tefillot was born.

Nathan of Nemirov (1780-1845) was impressively prolific in his writing. Many of his works are compilations of Rabbi Nahman's teachings, or applications of Rabbi Nahman's ideas to other works, such as his *Likutei Halachot*, in which he uses Rabbi Nahman's thoughts to parse the Shulkhan Arukh. He was diligent in preserving which words were his master's and which are his own, and appropriately delineates this in the text. As he was not present at the beginning of Rabbi Nahman's teaching career, he relied

[24] Green, *Tormented Master*, p. 3.

upon those who experienced his words first hand in his collection of Rabbi Nahman's work, his disciples and family. These he published as *Shivhei HaRan*, the praises of Rabbi Nahman.[25]

More than anything else, Nathan of Nemirov holds a unique place in Hasidic history, along with Rabbi Nahman. "Nathan is a self-conscious creator of a *new sacred history,* one in which the life of his master stands as the unique and all-important center of events in recent times."[26] His work in recording and transmitting Rabbi Nahman's words and teachings placed him in the position to write his own work, which we concentrate upon here. His goal of turning Torah, and the "torahs" or teachings of Rabbi Nahman, into prayer, succeeded in creating a masterful work of its own. His "new sacred history" is one which can illuminate for us the nature of the task of private prayer.

[25] Information of Rabbi Nathan's life was gathered from Green, *Tormented Master*; and *The Fiftieth Gate.*
[26] Green, *Tormented Master,* p. 9.

Chapter 2
Keva: The Structure of Private Prayer

"I am a firm believer in public worship.
I want to hold and read the liturgy of my people.
The worship that I love is something finer and wiser than prayer.
Prayer begins in need.
Worship begins in reverence.
Prayer is a measure of man's anxiety.
Worship is the measure of man's commitment.
Prayer begins in the overheated heart.
Worship begins in the reflective soul.
Prayer is half-formed – a thing of the moment.
Worship is sculptured – a thing of beauty.
Prayer is an urgency. Worship is a discipline.
We pray when life is too much for us. We worship, the better to live."[27]

This modern prayer expresses ideas begun with Maimonides, and continued in the teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav. Rambam, in *Hilchot Tefillah,* wrote "Any prayer that is without kavanah is not prayer at all."[28] That is to say, prayer without intention is not just unworthy prayer, or failed prayer, but is not prayer at all. This is groundbreaking thought in a world in which prayer was fixed with pre-ordained language. Traditionally, if one uttered prayers in an incorrect order, or skipped a necessary section, one would have to return to say these prayers again, and would not be considered exempt from the responsibility of worship until this was done. Here, while these rules still operate, they are not sufficient. One is not exempt from the obligatory prayers until one says them with intention.

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[27] "The Difference Between Prayer and Worship," by Daniel Jeremy Silver
[28] Hilchot Tefillah. Daf 16.

Furthermore, the text doesn't tell us that if one does not have the proper intention, one should not pray; instead, the words uttered simply do not comprise a prayer. Prayer, then, must consist of both fixed words and this mysterious intention. We will discuss the nature of this intention in the third chapter.

Thus the tradition separates fixed prayer from free intention, but they are seen to be concurrent; in other words, kavanah takes place within prayer of fixed forms. But for Rabbi Nahman, there are two types of "prayer"; in other words, public worship and private prayer.

Academia is familiar with public worship. The words used, the intentions ascribed to those words, and the result of those prayers have been discussed here briefly and elsewhere in detail. But private prayer is academically more foreign, even as it can be emotionally so familiar.

Spontaneous prayer takes place within the Bible itself.

> "The Bible is frequent witness to such prayers, ranging from Moses' one-line outcry when his sister was taken ill – 'Please, God, heal her!' (Num 12:13) – to the triumphant Song at the Sea (Ex. 15) or many of the Psalms. Such prayers, whether verbal or silent, belong to a particular moment, and their power lies in the direct expression they give to the pain or joy of that moment."[29]

This type of prayer is often referred to as "contemplative prayer," and there are masters who have written tomes on this.[30] By analyzing this type of prayer, we can discern the type of prayer-world within which Rabbi Nahman and Rabbi Nathan were writing and teaching.

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[29] Green, *Eheyeh*, p. 153.
[30] See Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*; Green, *Your Word Is Fire.*

"What a great wonder that we should be able to draw so near to God in prayer. How many walls there are between man and God! Even though God fills all the world, He is so very hidden! Yet a single word of prayer can topple all the walls and bring you close to God."[31] This text sums up the awe and wonder of the dialogue between human beings and God. In mystical teachings, God is described as hidden, full of secrets. The world holds these deep secrets and it is our task to turn to Torah, with which we can unlock them. But here, in true Hasidic form, Torah is not the key with which the hidden gates are unlocked. Instead, it is the power of prayer that brings down the walls and places us in God's realm. It is not that our words bring God close to us, but rather that prayerful words bring us close to God.

Intention during prayer is considered to be tremendously powerful. Another text is illustrative:

> "Once a wise man was asked: 'On what thought do you concentrate as you pray?' He replied: 'I bind myself to the Divine Life that flows through all of God's creations. As I join myself to each I seek to bring the life within it back to God.' 'Destroyer!' said the other. 'How can the world exist if you draw out all of its life?' The wise man remained unperturbed: 'Do you really think I can do all that – I who have so little power?' 'But in that case,' replied the other, 'of what value is your prayer?'"[32]

Not only does prayer have this kind of power, according to Hasidic thought, but that power comes from the very act of *believing* that prayer has such power!

> "The truth is that you must believe in the power of your prayer. The truly wise, who stand before the King in prayer, surely can bind themselves to the flow of

[31] *Liqqutim Yeqarim* 2b (selected and translated in Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 20).
[32] *Or Ha-Me'ir* 5:31c. (selected and translated in Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 22).

Life. But they are not allowed to do so always – lest by their uplifting powers they do indeed destroy the world."[33]

Rabbi Nahman was operating within a system of obligatory public prayer, and was not in the least against this type of worship. In fact, he would have been the last person to argue against the need for the rituals and obligations that constituted Jewish life. However, he asserted that there was indeed something else, something different in character and texture from that of the public, structured, synagogue worship. "There are two aspects to prayer: the prayer itself, and a prayer for the ability to pray."[34] These words of Rabbi Levi of Berdichev suggest to us that "when spirituality had so declined that it was difficult to sustain purity of intention in prayer,"[35] human beings developed the need for this second type of prayer.

For Rabbi Nahman, private prayer has several components. This type of prayer contained a *keva*, or structure of its own; the structure is not evident in the words themselves, but in the fact that contemplative prayer must be a fixed practice: "one should fix for himself an hour or more '*l'hitboded l'vado*,' in a room or in a field..."[36] Alone in solitude, preferably at night "when the world is free of worldly occupations,"[37] one should "converse openly with your Creator, [whether] offering arguments or apologies, in words that are grateful, pacifying, and conciliatory, beseeching and imploring Him to bring you close to Him in order to serve him sincerely."[38] This is not only a prayer for prayer, but a way to speak in one's own words, "openly," with whatever

[33] Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 22.
[34] Lamm, p. 198.
[35] Ibid, footnote 89.
[36] *Likkutei Moharan*, Tinyana no. 25.
[37] Lamm, p. 198.
[38] Ibid., p. 198.

is in one's heart. To this end, Rabbi Nahman also believed this type of prayer should be in the vernacular.[39]

Arthur Green expresses this thought in the following way:

> "On the face of things, prayer is absurd. Do we really need to communicate with God in human language, by moving our mouths and making sounds in our throats? Is this the way to reach the One who knows our hearts, who indeed *is* our deepest heart.... For prayer to be *ours,* to be a vehicle for the soul or the Divine within to communicate with us, it has to be in our language. Not because God needs words, but because *we* do. It is also important that prayer be in the sort of language that touches us most deeply.... To do so, it needs the language that can reach us where we hurt and where we feel true joy."[40]

God's world existed before words; but ours needed language in order to come into being.[41]

The vernacular of which Rabbi Nahman spoke was Yiddish. He suggested that it could be more difficult to "express yourself in the Holy Tongue (Hebrew). Furthermore, since we do not customarily speak in Hebrew, your words would not come from the heart."[42] The priority here is for the words to be a true and honest expression of the inner self; words written by someone else could not suffice. Thus, while Rabbi Nahman did feel that Yiddish had a special attraction as the language of prayer, as he explained that "the heart is more attracted to Yiddish,"[43] the essence of his thought here is that the key is to pray in the vernacular. Any language, so long as it is one's common tongue, can be used for prayer. For while Yiddish is no doubt, by virtue of its inclusion and incorporation of *Lashon Kodesh*, unique and special, this type of prayer "is something

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[39] Ibid., p. 198.
[40] Green, *Eheyeh*, p. 156.
[41] See Breishit 1:3.
[42] Ibid., p. 198.
[43] Ibid., p. 198.

that everyone, great or small, can benefit from, for everyone is able to do this and reach great heights through it."[44] Therefore, a person must pray in his or her own language.

Not only is this private sort of prayer necessary, but the solitude it requires is "a superior value, greater than all others."[45] He tells us that "many great and famous *zaddikim* relate that they reached their [high] state only by virtue of this practice. The wise will understand from this how important such practice is and how it rises to the very highest levels."[46] In fact, the very goal of prayer, *bitul hanefesh* (self-nullification), is impossible without this practice of *hitbodedut*. This practice of solitude, then, makes up part of the necessary structure, or *keva,* of contemplative, private prayer.

We see that for Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, there are indeed rules of private prayer. There is a structure necessary in that regular habits of solitude are to be established, and one must find a way to pour out one's heart honestly and openly. But beyond this, we need to ask: should there be rules of private prayer? Is there a structure one needs to abide by? Or, does private prayer by definition have to be unstructured, without *keva*? To answer these questions, and to begin to get at the core of the nature of private prayer, we will examine three texts. All of these texts were radical in their times. First, and most importantly, is Nathan of Nemirov's *Likutei Tefillot*. Next, we will look at *Seyder Techines*, the prayer-book for women. Finally, we will examine a modern text, Naomi Levy's *Talking to God.*

Likutei Tefillot, while compiled and published by Nathan of Nemirov, is indeed the collection of thoughts and practices of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav. "[Rabbi Nahman]

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[44] Ibid., p. 199.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

placed great emphasis upon the *siha*[47], the personal spontaneous prayer in which one speaks in simple, direct terms to God, privately pouring out one's soul and reviewing one's life and deeds."[48] In his own introduction to the text, Rabbi Nathan explains: "Rebbe Nahman, of blessed memory, told us many different times and in many different ways to turn his teachings into prayers."[49] The teachings he was describing are words of Torah, and Rabbi Nathan continues: "[Rebbe Nahman] said that never before has there been anything like the delight God has from the prayers we make our of Torah teachings." [50] According to Wineman, "It is as though the conventional line separating Torah from prayer, separating God's word to man from man's response to God, is completely blurred."[51]

Perhaps the first example of this is in the book of Psalms. The very fact that this book is part of the codified Tanakh, the biblical canon, "suggests that the prayer of man can be included within the category of revelation."[52] This reinforces the Hasidic understanding of prayer as central to religious life, not purely from the standpoint of the personal need of humankind for such an activity, but from the standpoint of the communal need for revelation of Torah, and finally redemption of the world. "In the prayer of each person... God speaks."[53] Even Rabbi Nahman's stories illuminate his concepts of prayer. As David Roskies explains, one such story "recasts the *experience* of

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[47] *Siha* in modern Hebrew means "conversation," which elucidates the idea that this is a conversation between human beings and God, rather than a monologue.
[48] Wineman, p. 45.
[49] *Fiftieth Gate*, p. xv.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Wineman, p. 43.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., p. 44.

prayer, the awesome and unbridgeable gap between the worshipper and God..."[54] and we see similar stories throughout Rabbi Nahman's work.

There is a Hasidic teaching[55] that explains this idea, based on the final words of the *Ma Tovu* prayer: וַאֲנִי תְּפִלָּתִי לְךָ יְיָ, עֵת רָצוֹן *Va'ani tefillati l'cha Adonai, eit ratzon.* Many prayer-books translate this in the following way: "Let my prayers be to you at the appropriate time," or, "let my prayers rise to you...." If we slightly mistranslate these words, according to our Hassidic teaching, they can also mean something radically different. "As for me, let me *be* my prayer to you." May I become the very words and ideas that I pray, so that as I leave I affect true Torah in the world.

So we find that this work, *Likutei Tefillot*, is meant to be a concretization of the idea of the transformation of Torah into prayer. This collection of prayers is derived from Rabbi Nahman's teachings about Torah. But Nathan tells us "the Rebbe never explained exactly what he meant by this,"[56] so he and others were left to infer the master's meaning. Nathan decided that Rabbi Nahman meant this literally. "We should try to study each of his awesome and holy teachings with a view to understanding the *practical* guidance contained in it."[57] Nathan discovered a very practical way to understand these teachings, and Likutei Tefillot is thus a collection of fairly simple, heartfelt prayers to "become" Torah.

Not only are these prayers easily read and full of honest, deep longing, they are also a prayer for prayer. In previous Hasidic approaches to contemplative prayer, such as that of the Maggid of Mezrich, "man virtually annuls his own active being and becomes a

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[54] Roskies, p. 95.
[55] Taught by Danny Maseng, New York, 2001.
[56] The Fiftieth Gate, xv.
[57] Ibid., xv.

passive instrument through which the Divine speaks."[58] But this is not entirely Nahman's, nor Nathan's, approach. In their understanding, "man has a decidedly active role in prayer, and it is precisely because of this that God speaks through man's prayer and through man's words."[59] Rabbi Nahman himself explains: "Because one has entered into prayer and made the effort and prepared himself to speak before God, may His Name be blessed, God sends words into his mouth..."[60] That is to say, human beings offer up words so that God will fill our mouths with that which we truly need to say. "*Adonai, s'fatai tiftach....*" God, open our lips that our mouths may declare your praise."[61]

This actually takes some of the pressure off of human beings in the process of prayer. Prayer thus becomes a partnership with God; the worshipper begins and God meets him, carrying him where he needs to go. In essence, "man's words of prayer... are God's speech."[62] It is not, however, that the pray-er is passive in this process. On the contrary, just like God's words brought the world into being, human words bring prayer, and in this case, Torah, into being.

But while on the surface these prayers appear to be thematically structured (based on Nahman's *Likutei Moharan*) but verbally and particularly free of form, this is indeed not the case. Nahman is reported to have explained that "the entire order of his teachings is based upon the order of prayer,"[63] even though "the total order of his lectures and teachings ... have hardly advanced beyond the place which corresponds to the very beginning of the morning prayer."[64] Furthermore, according to Rabbi Nahman, there is a

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[58] Wineman p. 44.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Daily Liturgy: Amidah.
[62] Wineman, p. 44.
[63] Ibid., p. 43.
[64] Ibid.

"language of prayer."[65] This does not mean that this language is formal or preordained. His words imply, however, that there are some criteria for how one talks to God, even in private.

These criteria are difficult to discern, as they are sometimes contradictory, as evidenced by the two following passages:

> "The hour of formal prayer is not the only time when you may seek to bind yourself to God. In doing so outside the hour of prayer, however, take special care that no one else be near you as you ascend to the higher worlds. Even the chirping of birds could disturb you; even the unspoken thought of another person could bring you back to earth."[66]

And, additionally,

> "When you seek to be alone with God, have at least one companion with you. Alone, one is in danger. When two are in the same room, each of them may turn to God separately. When you are more experienced, you may sometimes meditate alone in a room – but surely someone else should be in the same house with you."[67]

Thus, these two contradictory passages coexist, perhaps reflecting two different experiences within the human psyche. There is danger in prayer, clearly. The danger approaches from without in the form of disturbances; and it approaches even in the process of being alone with God.

Likutei Tefillot

Let us now turn our attention to the way in which Torah is translated into prayer. In *Likutei Tefillot*, the prayers often read at first glance as if they were merely journal

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[65] Ibid.
[66] *Keter Shem Tov* 37b (selected and edited by Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 114).
[67] *Liqqutim Yeqarim* 15b (selected and edited by Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 114).

entries. However, looking more deeply into their structure and words, we find that they contain many words and phrases from both the public worship service and from *Tanakh*.

Within *Likutei Moharan* itself, Rabbi Nahman himself "shifts the focus... from text to praxis."[68] In other words, *Likutei Moharan* "offers its readers new devotional methods and precepts, constructing an edifice of Jewish piety built on the foundations of halakha but going beyond it."[69] Rabbi Nathan took the process in a very natural direction when he created prayers based on *Likutei Moharan*. "For Rabbi Nahman's disciples, *Likutei Moharan* becomes the new sacred text of Judaism, a lens through with the entire tradition is reread."[70]

Rabbi Nathan writes "Rebbe Nahman's lessons and discourses are universal. The more one explores them, the more one discovers their radiant light and great depth, both in simple meaning and on the hidden, mystical level."[71] His personal process of exploring these lessons begins with the very first teaching. *Likutei Moharan* (LM) begins by asserting that with regards to Torah, "all the prayers and all the requests that we request and pray are accepted."[72] This is the goal for *Likutei Tefillot* (LT) [73].

Rabbi Nahman begins most of his lessons by explaining the goal of the teaching that will follow. He follows this with various proofs, which make his point clear and show how to go about attaining it.[74] In the first teaching, Rabbi Nahman makes the point that will be utilized throughout the entire series, namely that Torah is the vehicle by

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[68] Magid, *Associative Midrash*, p. 15. See also Zeev Gries, Sifrut HaHanhagot (Jerusalem 1989).
[69] Ibid., p. 15
[70] Ibid., p. 19
[71] *Likkutei Moharan* (LM) p. xiii.
[72] Ibid., p. 15.
[73] In order to compare LM and LT, note that prayers 1-70 in LT correspond to teachings 1-70 in LM. Beyond that, I have inserted a chart from *Likkutei Moharan* which explains the corresponding texts.
[74] LM p. 16.

which prayers will be accepted.[75] The rest of the series explains different aspects of this idea.[76]

Torah study in this teaching is connected to the idea of *chein*, grace. Torah is central to the prayers of the Jewish people, and when prayers are conducted regarding Torah, they will certainly be accepted, according to Rabbis Nahman and Nathan. The connection is this: we have sinned, and the grace and importance of the Jewish people has fallen, but the study and prayer regarding Torah can redeem us and restore this grace, both in terms of the spiritual and the physical.

The next section begins to explain how this takes place. "The Jew must always focus on the inner intelligence of every matter, and bind himself to the wisdom and inner intelligence that is to be found in each thing." [77] From this process, everything becomes clear, and the person draws nearer to God. Jacob becomes the greatest example of this. Rabbi Nahman explains that Jacob, because he "merited the rights of the firstborn,"[78] is equivalent to *reishit*, the first. But according to Talmudic thought[79], *reishit* does not just refer to the obvious and literal meaning, but to *chochma*, wisdom. The two are linked in

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[75] "One of Rabbi Nachman's followers came to him seeking advice. It seemed to this follower that his prayers were not acceptable before God. The Rebbe advised him to study Torah, preferably Mishna or Talmud, immediately after praying." LM, p. 15 This is the way in which LM was initiated, centering on the idea of prayer, and whether our prayers are worthy before God. This introduction makes the next logical step to create actual prayers, which is what this research project focuses on.

[76] I have chosen to focus here on two texts from *Likkutei Moharan*, and the two corresponding prayers from *Likkutei Tefillot*, numbers 1 and 3. Upon considering prayers from all throughout these works, it seemed that these three were ultimately indicative of the style and themes of the entire works, and they held particular interest to me because of their subject matter. One point to consider: later in LM, the texts become much shorter, consisting sometimes of only a couple of paragraphs, or even several sentences. Their corresponding prayers sometimes consist of large extrapolations on the basis of these sentences, and sometimes they too are short. However, the idea upon which *Likkutei Tefillot* was written remains clear and intact throughout the entire work: to turn Torah, and torah (teachings of Rabbi Nahman) into prayer.

[77] LM, p. 17.

[78] LM, p. 19.

[79] Talmud Bavli Masechet Brachot Dav 17 Amud 1.

the following phrase from the Psalms: *"reishit chochma yir'at Adonai."*[80] Jacob is connected to wisdom through his identity as *reishit.* The Zohar takes this further to equate *chochma* with "the first of the manifest *sefirot.*"[81] By focusing on the inner intelligence and discovering the inner wisdom of a thing, a person actually binds himself to God through the attribute of *chochma.* This process is then prayers become worthy.

The fluidity of Rabbi Nahman's movements through Talmudic and mystical texts calls out to be noticed. These lessons are constructed to move the reader (or listener) from one place to another; the journey is difficult, and the journey of words and metaphors is equally difficult. As Avraham Greenbaum describes in the introduction to *The Fiftieth Gate,* "because Rebbe Nahman weaves together many different and difficult concepts, the reader can easily lose the lesson's flow."[82] From one idea, Rabbi Nahman jumps to the next by virtue of associations. "It is thus common in *Likutei Moharan* for the Rebbe to connect one concept to a second and third concept, and then to return to connect the second concept to the third one and so on."[83] This is common in both homiletic and aggadic midrash, and it is helpful if the reader is familiar with this aspect of the Rabbinic discourse. In Rabbi Nahman's teaching, the concept of the sun is elucidates the connection between Jacob and inner intelligence: "For inner intelligence shines for him in all his ways."[84] This idea is once again supported by a text from the tradition, this time from Proverbs: "The path of the righteous is like radiant sunlight,

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[80] Psalms 111:10.
[81] LM, p. 18.
[82] Ibid., p. xiv.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., p. 21.

shining ever brighter as it approaches noon."[85] Finally, Rabbi Nahman begins to tie all things together by introducing an analysis of the letters.

He begins with *chet*, which "suggest[s] *chiyut* (life)."[86] It is explained that the *chet*, when its name is spelled out, can also be read as "life." Once again, a verse from *Tanakh* elucidates, or at least furthers, the discussion "Wisdom gives life to those who possess it."[87] Therefore the *chet* is associated with life in two ways: first, the *chet* as the first letter of the word *chochma* comes to represent the very idea of wisdom, which is the source of life; second, the alternative reading of the letters strengthens the connection.

Let us take stock of what we have here. Rabbi Nahman is trying to prove that Torah is the pathway to acceptable prayers. Inner intelligence is the way to access this, Jacob is the prime example, as he represents wisdom, which is connected to the sun and to life itself. This begs the question that will be addressed and answered in the very next paragraph: if inner intelligence is so bright, how do we focus on it?

At the beginning of this lesson, we learned that Torah is the way to attain the lost grace (*chein*) of the Jewish people. Now we find that all the letters in the word *chein* are in fact symbolic. It is through the final letter, *nun*, that we are able to attain wisdom.[88] The *nun* is linked to *malchut*, kingship. Another name for *malchut* is *shechinah*, the lowest level of God's emanated self, and the aspect that is the most accessible to humanity. *Malchut* in *sefirotic* thought is the lower parallel to *chochma*, and thus it forms the pathway to that upper realm. The repercussions of this are deep: the pathway to attaining true wisdom requires both the presence of God's kingdom in the world, and

[85] LM p. 21, Proverbs 4:19.
[86] Ibid.
[87] LM p. 21, Ecclesiastes 7:12.
[88] Ibid.

humanity's recognition and acknowledgment of this fact. Humanity cannot achieve enlightenment except through God's life-giving grace; and the beginning of wisdom finds is concretized through the realization of God's presence. Wisdom is acquired through the study of Torah.

Malchut is also "likened to the moon, which does not shine on its own but only reflects the sun's light."[89] Accessing the sun itself is not possible for all people, true wisdom, or perceiving the inner intelligence of all things, is not an easy process. But faith is the way to proceed to this wisdom. "Faith... reflects the greater light of the inner intelligence."[90] Prayers will be accepted based on faith.

Now we see the balance that is inherent in all things. While Jacob is associated with wisdom, Esau is the one who didn't bind the self to the inner intelligence. By discarding the birthright for the mundane physical aspect of food, he shows his disrespect and disregard for *reishit* which is *chochma*. This is again proved by a verse from Proverbs: "a fool does not desire understanding."[91] Esau hunted rather than studying, and was unable to subjugate his physical desires (upon returning home hungry). Eating, according to Rabbi Nahman, creates a connection between the "spiritual soul and the physical body....had Esau desired wisdom, he would have related to eating as a spiritual experience. Instead, he asked Ya'akov to stuff him."[92]

In effect, there is a battle set up here between the good inclination and the evil inclination. A person should "give strength to the kingdom of holiness... by means of

[89] LM p. 24.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., p. 25.
[92] Ibid., p. 27.

Torah study with enthusiasm.... Then, *malchut/nun* receives vitality from *chochma/chet*. The *chet* and the *nun* are joined and bound together,"[93] spelling *chein*/grace.

But even so, this is not enough. One more layer, one more word-play is required to complete the fullness of Rabbi Nahman's thought. He has taken us through the processes by which prayer is created; but he has not addressed how these prayers are received. Now we learn that prayers will not be accepted if "the words lack grace and do not penetrate the heart of the One being asked."[94] To complete the flow of this idea, the reader must locate the "heart of the One," and Rabbi Nahman shows this to us in the following way. "By affixing the letter *nun* to the left leg of the letter *chet*, the letter *tav* is formed."[95] The *tav* stands for the phrase "'*hitvita tav*,' inscribe a mark."[96] When prayers are uttered by those who have been granted *chein*/grace, a mark is etched upon the heart God. Together, these three letters (*nun*, *chet*, *tav*) create the word *nachat*, meaning "gently." When all these three concepts come together, the result is a gentle embrace.

The greatest problem, Rabbi Nahman now explains, is that evil often disguises itself as a mitzvah. He uses a teaching of Rabbi Bar Bar Chana to explain that evil is subdued and defeated through Torah, which is comprised entirely of the names of God. Then, like in a midrash, Rabbi Nahman returns us to our opening verse, and shows how the entire lesson is embodied therein.

Connections are of vital importance in Rabbi Nachman's work, and this is continued in Rabbi Nathan's prayers. According to Bergman and Mykoff in their introduction to Likutei Moharan, "one of the things which the reader notices almost at the

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[93] LM, p. 31.
[94] Ibid., p. 33.
[95] Ibid., p. 35.
[96] Ibid.

outset is the predominance of 'connections and relationships.'"[97] We have seen how these connections take place between ideas, and how Rabbi Nahman returns to tie things together. These relationships also take place between words. "The reader would... do well to direct his attention to the connections which Rebbe Nahman makes between similarities in terminology."[98] For example, in the very first section, Rabbi Nahman connects a "graceful gazelle" (*ya'ALat chein*) to "bestows grace" (*she ma'ALah chein*), showing that "the Torah.. a graceful gazelle... bestows grace upon those who study her."[99] We have also seen how Rabbi Nahman works with the letters themselves to create connections between ideas, between sefirot, and between the goal of having our prayers accepted and the study of Torah.

Rabbi Nathan's task is somewhat easier than drawing all of these connections. Once they have been established in *Likutei Moharan*, he can simply rely upon them, rather than having to recreate them. In the first prayer, Rabbi Nathan begins with the overarching theme of Torah: "Help me to be able to study, teach, and practice Your holy Torah for its own sake and at all times, and to keep the Torah at the forefront of my mind day and night."[100] It is clear that Rabbi Nathan is drawing upon Rabbi Nahman's elaborate description of the meaning of Torah study. The very fact that Rabbi Nathan asks for assistance suggests that he perceives human beings as supremely flawed; they need help in accomplishing the kind of study that is required in order for them to attain wisdom and receive God's grace.

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[97] LM, p. xiv.
[98] Ibid., p. xv.
[99] Ibid., p. 17.
[100] LT, p. 3.

Rabbi Nathan utilizes the idea of *zchut*, merit, echoing the thoughts of Rabbi Nahman: "*ut'zakeh otanu*, "may we merit by your great compassion... [the ability] to study and teach...."[101] Rabbi Nahman too used this word often, when he described that "Jacob merited the rights of the firstborn (*ki Ya'akov zakah la-b'chorah*)."[102] Thus Rabbi Nathan draws directly upon not only ideas from *Likutei Moharan* but the words themselves.

Another idea Rabbi Nathan utilizes is faith in the possibility of these prayers being answered. That is to say, he explains "I'll be able to free myself by studying and keeping the Torah, which is entirely made up of Your holy Names. The power of the Torah will overcome any sway this foolishness may have over me."[103] He knows what the answer is; he knows that Torah will make this all possible because endless rabbinic teachings (including Rabbi Nahman's) have declared it to be so. He even expresses the direct idea that the Torah is comprised of God's names, which Rabbi Nahman addresses as well.[104] Once Rabbi Nathan reminds himself that this is possible, he knows exactly what to ask for: "Just help me drive [this foolishness] out and remove it from myself and my life."[105]

Rabbi Nathan does not copy the order of Rabbi Nahman's teaching, but takes the themes out of their original order. He addresses the problem of evil masquerading as mitzvot early in the prayer, rather than waiting to use it as a coda, as Rabbi Nahman does. Clearly, the idea that evil hides itself resonates for Rabbi Nathan, calling him to direct his initial thoughts in order to steel himself against this problem. It is only then that Rabbi

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[101] LT, p. 3.
[102] LM, p. 18.
[103] LT, p. 3.
[104] LM, p. 45.
[105] LT, p. 3.

Nathan asks for compassion from God, utilizing the language of the traditional prayer book to address the ideas found in *Likutei Moharan*. "*Chus v'chamol al nafshi ha'um'lala, v'hatzileini,*"[106] have compassion upon my poor soul and save me. Rabbi Nathan's biggest fear is that he will be swallowed up by evil in the attempt to perform mitzvot. Once he has prayed for Torah to be his life, the very first thing he needs to ask for is help in discerning the difference between Torah and evil. Then, he is able to address wisdom and intelligence, which comes first in Rabbi Nahman's text. Without help, it might not be possible to distinguish what is really wisdom, and what is the evil dressing up to present itself as wisdom. But once evil has been foiled, there is room for drawing closer to God through "everything in the world."[107]

The next concept Rabbi Nathan addresses, *chein*, is also out of order, as Rabbi Nahman essentially began with the loss of grace from the people of Israel. However, in the prayer *chein* is seen to be an addendum to *chochma*, a quality that fills wisdom with gentle goodness. Rabbi Nathan reminds God of what Rabbi Nahman taught, that "the grace and prestige of Your holy people Israel have fallen in this bitter exile."[108] But he not only asks for this grace to be restored, he asks for God to "bring down the idol-worshippers, the unholy and the wicked. Let them have no grace and status whatsoever either above or below."[109] This is perhaps an allusion to the evil masquerading as good; if the wicked are allowed no grace, then evil cannot thrive.

This prayer concludes with words from the Psalms: "For He has not despised or spurned the suffering of the poor and He has not hidden His face from him. When he

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[106] LT, p. 4.
[107] LT, p. 7.
[108] LT, p. 9.
[109] LT, p. 11.

cries to Him, He hears."[110] These words once again act as a proof-text of what is possible, and indeed, what is in store for Jews in the future. The worshipper has the ability to ask for these things because his texts tell him that they will indeed come to pass.

Thus, while Rabbi Nathan does not completely preserve the order of *Likutei Moharan*, he preserves the spirit and understanding of the teachings, and transforms the teachings into a logical order of prayer. Meanwhile, he rearranges these ideas into prayers that express his deepest desires to accomplish the lessons taught by Rabbi Nahman, and provides a pathway to follow as the worshipper attempts to do the same. Moving from Torah to tefillah allows Rabbi Nathan to guide the direction of the ideas with the deep needs of his own heart.

Each teaching in *Likutei Moharan* is from a different time in Rabbi Nahman's life. They are meant to be independent; and yet Rabbi Nahman expressed that they are meant to follow the order of the prayer service.

The third text is of particular interest to this researcher, as it speaks of both cantors and rabbis. "Although directly this lesson was taught regarding the cantor of Ladizin, whose sinful behavior Rebbe Nahman revealed indirectly, it also relates to other *chazzanim* with whom the Rebbe had previous dealings."[111] In order to decipher the connection to LT, we need to consider the winding and sermonic character of the *Likutei Moharan* text.

This text begins by explaining that it is detrimental to the soul to listen to a singer who is wicked, whereas a singer who is virtuous actually helps. Rabbi Nahman links the word *chazzan*, cantor, with the word *chazzon*, vision, as they share a root. Thus a

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[110] LT, p. 11.
[111] LM, p. 112.

virtuous singer, a *chazzan*, expresses not only song but a prophetic vision. Conversely, a wicked singer with his evil song draws from the *kelipot*, the shells of evil.

The way to prevent this evil from taking hold is to study the oral Torah at night. The parallel is clear: the oral Torah strengthens the voice toward mitzvot and vision, and protects speech from evil. "By studying the six orders of the Mishnah a person rectifies the six rings of the windpipe, via which the voice emerges."[112] This is not only a spiritual protection, but a physical one.[113] But this study has to be for its own sake, not "in order to be called rabbi."[114] That is to say, one may not use the study of Torah for personal gain, either of status or wealth, or the effects of the evil remain.

The next section deals heavily with the metaphor of birds representing voice and speech.[115] There are birds of the *kelipah*, which make up "the intellect of *Malkhut d'Kelipah* (the Kingdom of the Other Side)," and there are birds that represent "*Malkhut d'Kedushah* (Kingdom of Holiness)."[116] Good song, derived from the latter, builds up the Kingdom of Holiness, whereas evil song builds *Malchut d'Kelipah*. The one who is considered to be representative of the path we are supposed to travel, according to Rabbi Nahman, is King David, who with his many songs built up God's kingdom. Therefore he was deserving of his own *malchut*.

Rabbi Nahman now draws upon a story told by Rabbah bar bar Chanah. This story serves to prove Rabbi Nahman's ideas regarding speech, voice, and Torah study,

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[112] LM, p. 97.
[113] Interestingly, according to many medical journals, CITE STUDY the voice and the emotions are strongly connected. There have been many cases in which singers have experienced lasting hoarseness, for which can be found no physical reason. Upon discovering emotional or spiritual trauma and working these issues through, the voice has been known to return. It is as if there is a physical barrier placed on speech while the emotional barrier lingers.
[114] LM, p. 97.
[115] LM, p. 91.
[116] LM, p. 99.

and he elucidates it in the following manner. We learn from this story that "only by rectifying speech is it possible to rectify the voice.... How does one rectify the voice through speech? By studying the Talmud, the sixty tractates."[117] The question then arises, what happens when study is not for its own sake? "The way to safeguard against such reprehensible study is by studying the Oral Torah at night..."[118] which in turn brings upon the person loving-kindness. God's loving-kindness on our behalf is so overpowering that it can protect us from both evil speech and the temptation to study Torah for personal gain.

Pirke Avot explains: "Get yourself a rabbi, acquire for yourself a companion, and judge everyone favorably."[119] The process of finding a rabbi is, to Rabbi Nahman, the process of becoming absorbed in the joyous song of another.[120] To be a rabbi is to inspire someone else with song, and finding a rabbi means building up God's holiness in the world, building up *Malchut d'kedushah*. That song is Torah, and in order for a person "to rectify his personal aspect of *malchut*, he must be very careful not to be misled by his own knowledge of Torah."[121] Yet this contains distinct dangers. When a person rectifies his aspect of *malchut*, he is able to rule over whatever he chooses, even bringing life or death upon a person. He now has the power of judgment. This is what is meant by the next part of the verse: "and judge everyone favorably" – one must always judge favorably in order not to destroy with one's new power.

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[117] LM, p. 105.
[118] LM, p. 104.
[119] Pirke Avot 1:6.
[120] Hence the Hasidic occupation with creating niggunim, wordless songs, that elevate the singer and the listener. These songs are meant to actually be teachings, rather than just melodies, and often have been used to elevate words known to be degenerate.
[121] LM, p. 104.

It must have been a common understanding that cantors, while perhaps enjoying beautiful voices, were not well respected for their intellect, both spiritual and academic. Rabbi Nathan writes that "people are now fond of saying that *chazzanim* (cantors) are fools, lacking in *deah* (knowledge)."[122] Because *Malchut/Shechinah* is in exile, these singers cannot access her in order to draw forth their songs, and instead songs are composed with the *Malchut d'kelipah*. In the future, "'God will be King over the entire earth'[123] [and] then song will be uplifted and perfected...."[124] King David had power to uplift even unholy song, and he caused the *malchut* of Holiness to ascend. He could not redeem all song, but showed how this is possible. Thus it is that when the Messiah, a descendent of King David, arrives, exiled prayers and songs will be redeemed along with the people who sing them.

The corresponding prayer in LT only seems to flow logically from point to point if the reader is familiar with LM. Rabbi Nathan switches from the theme of song to the theme of Torah without even a transition sentence.[125] The theme of remembering Israel is introduced with no clear connection to anything else in the prayer, save the birds in the proof text.[126] Furthermore, it is clear that the ideas of wicked music, Torah study, and night time are all related in Rabbi Nathan's mind, but we do not see the direct links unless we read the words of Rabbi Nahman. Even then, unless one knows the references and their *sefirotic* connections and attributions, it is difficult to understand the flow. It is, however, clear that music is profoundly connected to both Torah and redemption, and

[122] LM, p. 109.
[123] Zechariah 14:9.
[124] LM, p. 109.
[125] See LT, p. 37.
[126] See LT, p. 33.

that Rabbi Nathan believes that by the singing of good songs and the studying of Torah at the right times, redemption will come.

Despite Rabbi Nathan's heavy reliance upon the text of LM, it is not necessary to know Rabbi Nahman's thoughts in order to pray the words of LT. Praying does not necessarily require an understanding of the connection from one thought to the next. While LM clarifies and deepens one's understanding of the LT prayers, these words stand on their own in another way. Instead of the sometimes rigid prayers of the traditional siddur, these prayers are meant to be the musings of the mind. The mind wanders while praying; it is difficult to think in clear outline form when attempting to recite spontaneous prayers. These prayers, while based on Rabbi Nahman's formats, are also the free ramblings of Rabbi Nathan's mind, as he expresses his deepest hopes, that he will be able to become his own prayers.

As far as the direct subject matter is concerned, it must be noted that the corresponding prayer in LT does not relate solely to cantors. Instead, Rabbi Nathan takes this seemingly specified teaching and transforms it into something everyone can relate to. The prayer could be said by a chazzan, as it includes these words: "Give me the power to praise You joyously with songs and hymns. Let me sing melodies all my days, in a sweet, pleasant voice, the way You love."[127] However, these words could just as easily be said by anyone who is not a "professional" singer.

There is, as would be expected, a section that deals with the effect of a wicked singer. "Help me and protect me from the bad effects caused by hearing degenerate music – the songs and melodies of fallen souls, 'birds caught in the snare.'"[128] He goes on

[127] LT, p. 33.
[128] LT, p. 35.

to pray that they will not "distract me from my spiritual devotions,"[129] and that he will be granted the ability and power to uplift and restore the fallen music to the realm of holiness.

However, not only is song of importance here, but Torah study is primary, particularly at night, and only for its own sake. Sleep is perceived to be an evil, something with which to wage a battle that requires God's help in combating. "Help me to study Your holy Torah for its own sake constantly, day and night.... Master of the world, lovingly help me and give me the strength to win the battle against sleep."[130] These things will lead to the establishment of God's kingship over the world, what Rabbi Nahman calls "Malchut d'kedusha," the kingdom of holiness.

Rabbi Nathan does not draw from Rabbi Nahman's texts alone in order to express the words of his heart. Peppered throughout these prayers, and indeed within every one of Rabbi Nathan's prayers are selections drawn from the *Tanakh* and from liturgy. Their existence within the prayers connects Rabbi Nathan's work to the larger body of Jewish texts, and in a sense, they create a sort of structure/*keva*. This *keva* is loose, in that these texts serve to prove his points, but they also flow gracefully out of the desires of Rabbi Nathan's heart. Ultimately, they provide Rabbi Nathan with the foundation upon which he can base his requests of God, and they give him the ability and the strength to do so, knowing that his prayers have a chance of being heard. Thus, Rabbi Nathan not only draws upon the ideas and key words in *Likutei Moharan*, but utilizes key words and ideas from throughout the tradition, just as Rabbi Nahman does himself.

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[129] LT, p. 35.
[130] LT, pp. 34-5.

Prayer 3 concludes "*Az yimalei skhok pinu, ulshoneinu rinah*," "then our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues with joy."[131] Rabbi Nathan knows that he can look forward to such a time when God does exactly what he is asking for, because it has been foreseen in our texts. Rabbi Nathan knows he can ask God to "remember Your people Israel, who are scattered among the nations, and Your Holy Temple, which is destroyed and uninhabited,"[132] because "'the bird too has found a house, and the sparrow has found a nest for herself to put her fledglings – on Your altar, Adonai Tzevaot, my King and my God.'"[133] Finally, Rabbi Nathan concludes this prayer with the hope that "speedily, in our days,"[134] "'Adonai will come to save us, and we will sing our songs all the days of our lives for the House of Adonai.'"[135] This kind of confidence in God can come only by the deep knowledge of Jewish texts, and by a deep faith that the times spoken of in those texts will come to pass. Notice the convergence of individual spontaneity and traditional proof-texts; this work is a web of literary integration.

Versions of the phrases Rabbi Nathan uses are found both in the prayer book and throughout Tanakh, particularly among psalms,[136] and the connection between past, present and future pervades his prayers. The first line of Prayer 1, the very way with which Rabbi Nahman addresses God, connects the worshipper to his ancestors, and reminds God that he is related to the ones with whom God entered into the covenant: "*Adonai Eloheinu v'Elohei Avoteinu*," Lord our God, and God of our Ancestors.[137] (Other names for God will be explored in the fourth chapter of this thesis).

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[131] LT, p. 36; also Birkat Hamazon.
[132] LT, p. 37.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] This occurs throughout nearly all of his prayers.
[137] LT, p. 2.

Certainly, the appearance of these prayers at first glance is different from the understanding one gains through detailed study. At first, they do not appear to be concise and thought out. They read more like journal entries. But that is the genius of these prayers. While at the same time sounding like the opening up of Rabbi Nathan's heart, they are also directly connected to Rabbi Nahman's teachings, to Torah and other Jewish texts, and to the public liturgy. It is through deep understanding of Jewish thought that these prayers were written, and at the same time, they can be prayed by someone much less knowledgeable.

If these so-called private prayers are so much more than random thoughts, this raises a big problem: how literate a Jew does one need to be in order to pray? Can someone who does not know Torah pray? How does the worshipper start? Does it work to use someone else's words? Does the worshipper *need* to use someone else's words as an entryway? Can this text be used in this manner?

Rabbi Nathan was able to create this a work, a combination of his own thoughts and the values and ideals of the Jewish tradition, because he was already so steeped in Jewish learning. He knew Torah and Jewish texts; he knew the liturgy backwards and forwards. Thus his private prayers were more than the un-educated Jew would be able to create. However, we can claim that he himself would posit that this is unimportant in beginning the process of praying privately. Of course, for prayers to become more deeply instilled with Jewish values, and for the worshipper to become ever more deeply connected with God, it is obvious that study and knowledge of Torah only enhances the process.

The difference is, at the risk of stating the obvious, that whereas in public worship we come to pray communally, with common words and thoughts, asserting specific values and teachings that we want to ingrain ever more deeply into our world, our private thoughts are just that: private. Private prayer is meant to open up the passageways to God. Certainly, it is through study that one can come to "know" God, but as we explored in the first chapter, Hasidism allowed for every human being to have a direct connection to his or her Creator, uncomplicated by the difficult mental acrobatics of prior kabalistic teachings. Simply opening up the mouth to talk to God allows for the process to begin; it is impossible for anyone to pray deeply without first starting somewhere, wherever that person is.

Hasidic teachings reinforce this idea, even with regard to public worship. The Ba'al Shem Tov speaks about *madreigot*/steps of spiritual practice. The goal is to reach a state of effacement or nullification of the self through prayer, but the way to begin is by focusing on the letters. By allowing a "window in the *teiva*," in the word, one creates a window in the heart for that word. If "strange thoughts" appear, which they are want to do, there are ways to handle this.[138] But ultimately, one needs to accept and start at whatever step he finds himself upon, and only from there can the work of prayer begin.

It is instructive that Rabbi Nathan expressed his desire for his prayers not to be used as the final products but as starting points for other worshippers to empty out their hearts upon God. He understands that not only is it unnecessary for private prayer to consist of specific words and thoughts, but that would make it actually impossible for private prayer to accomplish its goal. If one uses words composed by someone else, one cannot express what is in the deepest recesses of one's own soul. The process of

[138] See *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, Amud Hatefillah, No. 48, p. 118.

transforming the thoughts buried in the heart into verbal language is not necessary for God, but it is entirely necessary for human beings.[139] Therefore, one cannot do the primary task Rabbi Nahman prescribes, to come close to God by expressing the depths of our own hearts, without using our own words. Rabbi Nathan's prayer book can be a starting point for a worshipper wanting to pray on his own. But it cannot be the end goal, or the task has not been accomplished.

Likutei Tefillot was not universally praised.[140] Nathan's opponents, who did not believe *Likutei Tefillot* to be a sanctioned work or prayer, believed that words of worship needed to be written by someone filled with *Ruach Hakodesh*, Holy Spirit, not by anyone at any time. These prayers needed to have a specific structure and form. Nathan's work was groundbreaking for this reason. He utilized the known quantities of *Tanakh* and liturgy to create prayers that flowed directly from his heart. And yet, if we imagine that he created another form of structure, another thing to pray before one begins to use one's own words, then it does not serve the purpose of private, personal prayer. Perhaps, too, his opponents have a point: if prayers are substitutes for sacrifice, which needed to be of a specific form and intention, then it could seem correct that prayer needs to also be pure and unblemished, devoid of extraneous words, not in the form of journal entries of a stream of consciousness.

Seyder Tkhines

Perhaps we can understand more about the *keva* of private prayer by looking at other versions of private prayers. *Seyder Tkhines* is a book of prayers meant for women

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[139] It is interesting that in a time in which prayer has become less important in many people's lives, therapy has become even more important. The process of talking about one's thoughts and feelings out loud, in verbal language, is clearly of high importance to the human soul.
[140] *The Fiftieth Gate,* Introduction, p. 18.

to say. They first appeared in 1648 in their printed form, and thus reflect the mystical understandings that flowed through mainstream Judaism at the time. They arose out of the need for "spiritual regeneration, heartfelt prayer, and repentance by the entire community, women as well as men."[141] They were written in the vernacular, Yiddish,[142] and thus function as something between public and private prayers. "It offered a liturgy of prayer for women to say once a day as an alternative to, but based upon, the Hebrew liturgy."[143] However, these prayers are not meant to reflect the uneducated nature of women at the time; instead, "Yiddish is seen here as the language *chosen* by women for prayer."[144] Furthermore, since women had "no obligation to attend...time bound services... the daily *tkhines* gave them the opportunity to fulfill their obligation to pray once a day."[145] Women could not always pray in a *minyan*, in the community of other worshippers, and so these prayers remain primarily private thoughts and utterances of the heart.

For a detailed comparison of *Seyder Tkhines* with the daily prayer book, one may turn to several sources.[146] Some feel that it is "almost entirely unrelated to the prayers of [Hebrew] liturgy"[147]; others feel that it not only "served as an alternative to the Hebrew liturgy, but was based on it."[148] However, all experts seem to agree that the *tkhines* offer

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[141] Kay, *Seyder Tkhines*, p. 3.
[142] "In one of the most comprehensive works ever written on *tkhines*, the Reform rabbi, Solomon B. Freehof, adopted *tkhines* as the nucleus of his research in order to justify Jewish vernacular prayer." Kay, p. 114 Once again, it is important to note that "Yiddish is a specifically Jewish language, written in the Hebrew alphabet." Kay, p. 115.
[143] Ibid., p. 5.
[144] Ibid., p. 7.
[145] Ibid., p. 75.
[146] For a discussion of the relationship between *Seyder Tkhines* and the siddur, one may turn to Kay. The goal of this inclusion is not to determine this relationship, but to explore the connection between private prayers and their structure, as well as their inner life and intention. (see chapter 3).
[147] Kay, p. 73.
[148] Ibid.

something unique in their ability to capture verbally the heart of the worshipper: they are written in the language of the heart.[149]

The *tkhines* contain many of the traditions Rabbi Nathan utilizes in *Likutei Tefillot*. One such tradition is that of the use of a variety of names for God, depending upon the topic of the prayer and the need that requires fulfillment.[150] Another is the use of *zchut*, merit, to relate to God. "God, my God, and God of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,"[151] the prayer for every day begins. We merit talking to God, because our lineage links us to those who had a direct, spoken relationship with the Divine. Furthermore, many of the prayers use language that relates directly to other Jewish texts and the prayer book. Though these prayers are in translation, it is clear that the ideas are the same: "Everything is of His making, and He governs alone,"[152] or "He counts and he calculates,"[153] or "Inscribe me in the book in which are inscribed for eternal life all saintly men and women..."[154] which are reminiscent of the High Holy Days liturgy[155], are just a few examples of the parallels that exist. Often, the *tkhines* seem to be reminding the worshipper of values and aspects necessary to Jewish life, and reminding God of the nature of God's relationship with human beings. "I am part ashes and part earth... and I will fade like a shadow on a well that is soon gone..."[156] reminds the worshipper to be humble, because her life is not everlasting; whereas God, to whom she speaks, is "eternal. You were alone before the creation of the heavens and the earth, and

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[149] One of the *tkhines* was so relevant and connected to the Jewish heart that it has been included in the traditional prayerbook: *Gott fun Avraham*. This prayer has inspired many musical renditions as well. For further discussion of this, see Cantor Hollis Schachner's SSM thesis "Music and the Soul."
[150] See Chapter 4 for further discussion of the names of God during prayer.
[151] Kay, p. 126.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid., p. 128.
[155] Found in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, Rosh Hashanah Siddur.
[156] Kay, p. 127.

You will remain after all creation goes down to eternity."[157] On the other hand, these prayers are also forceful requests of God to "listen to me with great mercy. Answer me. Favor me, be gracious to me, and be merciful to me."[158]

One also finds traces and traditions of numerical play and mysticism in these prayers. "You gave 252 commandments to Your children Israel to carry out, and 248 that must be observed and kept, as many as men have parts of their body. And You have given to women, to correspond with our four limbs, four commandments of our own...."[159] Other selections show different influences of these prayers that depend upon the times in which the authors were living for their source. "Let my prayers reach You free from the interference of devils, or evil spirits who hinder prayers."[160] This shows the preoccupation with superstition that pervaded the minds of those living in this time. These prayers thus are a bridge between the traditional ideas and liturgy of fixed Jewish prayer, and "modernity," the world in which these women were living and the issues to which they had to adapt.

Talking to God

According to these sources, the task of prayer needs to contain both tradition and modernity. The tradition of writing private prayers thankfully did not stop with Nathan of Nemirov, nor with the codification of *Seyder Tkhines*. Rabbi Naomi Levy takes a different approach, meant to inspire and guide members of the Jewish world today. She expresses that today, people simply feel that they need to be "qualified" to pray, and that they need to be literate in Jewish texts in order to be able to even start. According to

[157] Kay, pp. 126-7.
[158] Ibid., p. 128.
[159] Ibid., p. 129.
[160] Ibid., p. 130.

Levy, this hinders moderns from starting to pray at all. A wall has been erected between human beings and their profound need to pray. Rabbi Levy has begun to reinvigorate the very idea of personal prayer with her two books, *Talking to God*, and *To Begin Again.* She has achieved acclaim based on her books that encourage people to pray on their own, and in their own words. "Canonized prayers contain ancient and eternal wisdom and are central to religious experience,"[161] she says. "They are dependable and beautifully written. Often set to sublime music, they link us to our community when we recite them together, and to our history when we remember that these very words were uttered centuries ago. They connect us to future generations as well, for they will continue to inspire for centuries to come.... But what do we do when the prayer book does not contain the words we are searching for? What do we do when certain feelings well up inside us, but the words to express them are absent from our own liturgies?"[162]

Today, according to Levy, people seem to feel that the prayer book *was meant to express everything one could need to pray for!* They do not realize that even the Rambam, and even the great mystics knew that one needed to engage the heart and its words just as much as the mind; that prayer is not a process of recitation but delving into one's deepest and most precious thoughts. Rabbi Levy wrote her books to give us permission, once again, to really pray.

Her prayers are based on experiences anyone might go through, and they ask for strength to carry through them. But instead of starting with the tradition, as *Likutei Tefillot* and *Seyder Tkhines* both do, these prayers start with the individual. Her words

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[161] *Talking to God*, p. 1.
[162] Ibid., p. 1-2.

are simple and easy to say. They do not contain academic words, nor do they contain clearly processed and flowery language. One prayer reads:

> "Open my heart, God; teach me to remove all obstacles I place in the way of love.
> Open my mind, God; prevent me from rejecting any person on the basis of superficial flaws.
> Open my mouth, God..."
> And it concludes: "Please send me my soul mate, God. Amen."[163] Another

prayer: "My doctors are telling me that things don't look too good. I'm scared, God. Help me, God. Give me hope. Give me something to fight for. Send me a miracle, God. Let me be the one who beats the odds...."[164]

These are words anyone could write, anyone could say, and this is the brilliance of Rabbi Naomi Levy. She does not seek to write words that would claim to be poetic and deep; she seeks to aid in expressing the words buried deep in the soul, and to show that special language is not necessary in talking with God.

She too, realizes that these words she has written are not the end, but the beginning of the process of "Talking to God." She writes "I pray that the words in this book will touch your hearts and souls. And that, when the moment is right, you will find your own way to talk to God. If the urge to reach God rises up inside you, don't hold back. Talk to God. Tell God your pain; express your gratitude, your hope, your deepest longing. And listen for a reply."[165]

All of these prayer books have something crucial in common: if these works are used as the "end" of prayer, they are not being used correctly, and they are not allowing the pray-er to do what is essential to the process – to pour out the heart to God. The goal

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[163] Ibid., "A prayer to find love," p. 43.
[164] Ibid., "A prayer when life is hanging in the balance," p. 130.
[165] Ibid, p. 16.

is not to pour out someone else's heart in someone else's words, but to access one's own deepest thoughts and thereby engage in one's own relationship with the divine.

All of these works are versions of a prayer for prayer. The process of private prayer depends on the formation of your own words, the grappling with one's own heart and mind. *That* is the only real structure that is necessary... whatever structure arises from one's own thoughts.

The question then arises, what thoughts should one express? Is the goal to empty one's heart and mind upon God, or is there something else that we need to consider? This leads us to a discussion of the inner life of prayer: the dynamics of *kavanah*.

Chapter 3
Kavanah: The Inner Life of Private Prayer

"Concentration in prayer has a long history.... The word used in the rabbinic literature for concentration is *kavanah.*"[166] *Kavanah* can have the meaning "to direct," as in "to direct or adjust the mind to the act of prayer in which man is engaged."[167] But it can also mean more[168] than the fact that "the worshipper is conscious that he stands in the presence of God and that his mind is aware of the meaning of the words he utters."[169]

Pirke Avot tells us "Be very careful in reciting the *Shema* and the *Tefillah.* When you pray, do not make your prayer a fixed form, but rather a plea for mercy and grace before God."[170] Rambam continues further in *Hilchot Tefillah*, saying "All prayer without *kavanah* is not prayer at all."[171]

Bahya Ibn Pakuda describes the importance of an inner life of prayer, in which one should "empty himself of all matters appertaining to this world or the next and he should empty his heart of every distracting thought."[172] This would seem to suggest that intention is a kind of emptying of focus, rather than creating something anew. He continues: "know that so far as the language of prayer is concerned the words are like the husk while reflection on the meaning of the words is like the kernel. The prayer itself is like the body while reflection on its meaning is like the spirit, so that, if a man merely utters the words of the prayers with his heart concerned with matters other than prayer,

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[166] Jacobs, p. 70.
[167] Ibid.
[168] *Kavanah* has been compared to "subtext" in theatrical terms. When on stage, an actor has certain lines he or she must deliver; however, the true meaning of those words is altered by the "intention" or deeper thoughts of the actor. See Alison Wienir: "Theatre and Ritual, Drama in the Cantor's Art." Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion School of Sacred Music, Masters Thesis, 2001.
[169] Jacobs, p. 70.
[170] Pirke Avot 2:13.
[171] *Hilchot Tefillah*, daf 16.
[172] *Hovot Halevavot*, VIII, 3.

then his prayer is like a body without a spirit and a husk without a kernel, because while the body is present when he prays his heart is absent."[173] *Kavanah* is the heart of prayer.

"The codes, following the Talmud, all stress the need for *kavanah* in prayer."[174] Maimonides asks: "What is the definition of *kavanah*? It means that [the worshipper] should empty his mind of all thought and see himself as if he were standing in the presence of the *Shechinah*."[175] In Jewish mysticism, *kavanah* takes on a different meaning. Louis Jacobs explains that there are complicated forms of mental acrobatics that must take place as a part of mystical contemplative prayer. "The Kabbalist is expected to have in mind, when he prays, all the complicated combinations in the Sefirotic realm."[176] Thus, in this kabbalistic approach to prayer, each word contains deep subtext and symbolism, referring beyond its literal meaning to express attributes of the divine. The process of prayer requires attention to this deeper meaning by tremendous focus and energy.

For Hasidism, *kavanah* takes on yet another meaning. While for the kabbalists intention was a highly intellectual act, demanding deep knowledge in order to perfect the act of prayer, the Hasidic approach transformed. Jacobs explains "that an originally intellectual effort of meditation and contemplation has become an intensely emotional and highly enthusiastic act.'"[177] This is the way in which room has been made for un-structured private prayer. While worship in the community remains tied to the structures created by the prayer book, private prayers allow thoughts and words of emotion, and the personal and intimate outpouring of the heart.

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[173] Ibid.
[174] Jacobs, p. 73.
[175] *Hilchot Tefillah* 4:15-16.
[176] Jacobs, p. 74.
[177] Jacobs, p. 75.

The following passage illuminates the concept that the human soul longs to return to God, and this is the process of prayer:

> "'Pour out your heart like water in the Presence of the Lord.' On the second day of Creation, God separated the upper and lower waters. At the moment of their separation, we are told, the lower waters cried out: 'We too long to be near our Creator!' So it is with the soul: it too once dwelt in the upper realms, near to God, and has fallen to the lowest depths. Like the lower waters of Creation, it cries out to return to God. 'Pour out your heart like the waters,' says the Psalmist, longing again to be 'in the Presence of the Lord.'"[178]

Not only was prayer to contain the aspect of pouring out one's heart, but the worshipper was to actually commune with God. This is the process of *dveikut,* one of the primary goals of Hasidic contemplative prayer. Whereas this concept had earlier roots in Jewish tradition, Hasidism, with its God who was immanent rather than transcendent, and who ultimately desired our return, took it farther: "Because God was so close, it became possible to make greater demands upon the Hasid's consciousness of God at all times. The classical doctrine of *dveikut,* attachment to or communion with God, was thus given a new emotional twist and raised to new levels of significance."[179] It should be noted here that "Hasidism did not presume to innovate. Its leaders were not conscious of changing anything in Judaism. They sought not to *create* but to *recover* religious truths."[180] The word *dveikut,* along with its meaning "to cleave" to something, essentially comes from Tanakh. Lamm explains that it is common throughout the Bible, but that "in five places in the Pentateuch, all in Deuteronomy, it is used specifically to designate the *dveikut* of man with God."[181] One of these is a description, and the others function as

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[178] *Hit'orerut Ha-Tefillah* 4a (selected and edited in Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 78).
[179] Lamm, p. 3.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid., p. 133.

commandments. Therefore this doctrine of *dveikut* was a part of Jewish contemplative prayer prior to this, yet it retained deeper and more prominent importance with the growth of Hasidism. In fact, "if immanentism is its major metaphysical underpinning, *dveikut* is Hasidism's chief and most characteristic religious value."[182]

The concept of *dveikut* has taken many forms in rabbinic and scholarly study. Some scholars explain it to mean imitating God's ways; others describe it as cleaving to Torah or something outside of God. But mysticism transformed this idea to be something much more literal.[183] This was as complicated and inconceivable for the mystics as it was for the sages before them; how could one possibly have such an intimate relationship with "*Ein Sof*"? Instead, kabbalists developed a pathway to *dveikut,* one that worked through the sefirot; one was able to strive for communion with different aspects of God, primarily *Malchut*, or *Shechinah.* As Lamm observes, "Most kabbalists regarded *dveikut* as the last stage of man's ascent to God, which is brought about by means of meditations (*kavanot)* on the Names of God – another term for the sefirot. These *dveikut* meditations were to take place in seclusion, protected by the distractions and turbulence of the prosaic world."[184] As *dveikut* developed, some (Nahmanides to begin with) understood it as "taking place not in seclusion but in the course of day-to-day life."[185] The Ba'al Shem Tov, over the course of his own development of this idea, expressed this view, that "*dveikut* was... a full time activity."[186] For him, *dveikut* was a heightened emotional state, not an end goal at all but a place to begin. Scholars following the lead of Gershom Scholem claim that for the Ba'al Shem Tov, however, this does not "negate the element

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[182] Lamm, p. 133
[183] Ibid. p. 134
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid., p. 135
[186] Ibid. p. 136

of meditative contemplation so cherished by the classical kabbalists."[187] Rabbi Nahman shares this dual view of *dveikut*.

According to this dual approach, one of the ways one begins to experience *dveikut* as an emotional state is through the following process: "it is important to know that *the whole earth is full of His glory* (Isa. 6:3) and *there is no place that is empty of him,* and that He is in all the worlds, etc.... A life-force of the Creator [] dwells in [every] material object, as the soul does in the body."[188] This knowledge should not remain just in prayer, but instead should permeate all one's dealings: "even if you are engaged in doing business with pagans, you cannot offer an excuse for yourself by saying that it is impossible to serve God because of the grossness and corporeality that befall you as a result of your continual business dealings with them...."[189] It is in precisely this kind of situation, one which tries the ability to focus on God, that it is most important to do so. The verse often used to describe this state of mind is from Psalms 16:8, "I set the Eternal always before me"; "even momentarily falling away from the state of *dveikut,"* for the Besht, "is considered a sin."[190]

Dveikut functions in this way due to the Hasidic approach to God and the world. Hasidim believed in "panentheism, that all is in God,"[191] or, that God is in all things. As a result, one seeks to return to a deep understanding of being a part of God, "an awareness that God alone is true reality and that all finite things are, as it were, dissolved in His unity."[192] Cleaving to God should be done by *bittul ha-yesh,* annihilation of the self, or

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[187] Ibid.
[188] R. Shelomoh of Lutzk, second introduction to *Maggid Devarav leYa'akov* by R. Dov Ber (selected and translated in Lamm, pp. 22-3).
[189] *Likkutei Moharan* I, no. 33 b.
[190] Lamm, p. 141.
[191] Jacobs, p. 21.
[192] Ibid.

of the entire idea of something-ness. Jacobs explains that "this attitude is especially to be cultivated at the time of prayer, so that in Hasidism prayer is essentially an exercise in world-forsaking and abandonment of self."[193] However, this must be distinguished from pantheism, which effectively denies the individual and separate existence of the self.[194] The human being strives not to lose himself, but rather "man still remains man, or, perhaps, has first begun to become man in wholeness."[195]

Dveikut was also seen as the way to "draw down, by means of the unification of the *Barukh Shem* ... His effluent will, the channels of His overflowing blessing," called *shefa.* Prayer in which the Hasid joined in the act of cleaving to God was thought to unify God's name, and therefore draw down God's bounty and blessings.[196] This points out the importance of *yihud,* another important Hasidic concept relating to *dveikut.* It is difficult to precisely define the idea of *yihud,* as it takes on different forms. As Lamm argues, "sometimes *yihud* means concentration of one's mind and thoughts, in the process of *dveikut,* on the focal point. Sometimes it implies simply the acknowledgement of divine unity,"[197] as we saw earlier in this chapter. In all of these experiences of *yihud* and more, the goal is unification, of one's thoughts, or of God Himself.

Other essential concepts in Hasidic kavanah are "*simchah,* joy in God's presence; *hitlahavut,* burning enthusiasm in God's worship; and *shiflut,* lowliness, humility, construed as a complete lack of awareness of self"[198] but originated often with the kind of

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[193] Ibid.
[194] Lamm, p. 138.
[195] Ibid.
[196] *Ketav Yosher Divrei Emet,* (compiled and edited in Lamm, p. 19).
[197] Ibid. p. 138.
[198] Jacobs, p. 14.

posture we understand as recognizing and admitting one's sins. We will see all three of these, along with the idea of *dveikut,* in Rabbi Nathan's prayers.[199]

Dveikut and the outpouring of the heart appear to be conflicting goals. The objective of *dveikut* is to be united and combined with God, while the outpouring of the heart would seem to necessitate remaining separate from God, in order to express one's personal needs, yearnings, gratitude and joy. To express this with regard to the tradition, "the halakhic backbone of prayer is petition," but "petition seems fatally tinged with selfish desire and with the presumption that man can somehow wheedle God into conforming to his wishes."[200] In fact, much, if not most, of *Likutei Tefillot* appears to be petitionary. But "if, for the quietists, the sentence 'I want' is considered a sin, a person can only pray to God that He assist him to negate his own will, so that he no longer knows whether he ever had any will, or whether such a will was fulfilled."[201] We are left with the question of the role of non-contemplative prayer, in light of the fact that petitionary prayer appears often in Hasidic teachings.

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[199] Rabbi Nachman's own personal struggles became a paradigm for the type of kavanah that contemplative prayer required. His own life contained "the most bitter battle against temptations and depressions constantly threatening to overwhelm him." (Green, *Tormented Master*, p. 144) It is easy to see how Rabbi Nathan's life fit into this type of paradigm, and how he found a spiritual home with Rabbi Nachman. Rabbi Nathan actually began as an opponent to Hasidism, like his father-in-law. However, when he left the home of his father-in-law the Rabbi, he began to interact with friends from his youth who had been highly influenced by Hasidic teachings. He searched for six years to find the right path, and finally in 1802 Nathan found his teacher Rabbi Nachman in Bratzlav. (See Green, *Tormented Master*, p. 148-149) After Rabbi Nachman's death, it was Nathan who became the leader of the Bratzlav community, and therefore he "determined what would be the 'official' history of the sect." (Green, *Tormented Master*, p. 149)

Nathan became, though not accepted by the rest of Rabbi Nachman's disciples, the mirror to Rabbi Nachman's life as a teacher. He went through stages of the teacher-student relationship, in which first, "the disciple is yet in search of self, or is yet on the path toward his own fulfillment. Here he seeks that which is lost to him, he looks into his master's eyes to find out where it is that he must go, what it is that he must do, in order to reach his end." (Green, *Tormented Master* p. 158) The next stage, when the "disciple reflects back the master's light, is one where he has gone beyond that search for self." (Green, *Tormented Master*, p. 158) It is this stage that he entered upon his writing of *Likkutei Tefillot.*

[200] Lamm, p. 174.

[201] Schatz Uffenheimer, p. 144.

Some, like the Maggid of Mezhirech, resolve this problem by explaining that prayer should be never be directed toward one's own needs but only toward God's: "Let not a person pray concerning matters of his own needs, but let him always pray only on behalf of the Shekhinah, that it be redeemed from its exile."[202] By praying for this, one actually accomplishes the needs of the self, for what else could the self possibly need? However, there are other approaches that are more moderate, and which balance the desire for *bitul hanefesh* with the understanding that petitionary prayer is a part of Divine revelation. Rejecting traditional prayer was simply not an option. Jacobs explains that while "the logical conclusion of the Hasidic doctrine would have been to reject all petitionary prayer as a hindrance to the attainment of self-annihilation... such a solution was not open to the Hasidim who believed, like their contemporaries, that the traditional liturgy, which contains numerous petitionary prayers, was divinely inspired and divinely ordained."[203] Their central way out of this bind was to believe that "petitionary prayer is not, in fact, a request to God to satisfy man's needs but to satisfy His own needs."[204] This is the reason contemplative prayer often contains the words *l'ma'ancha*, or *l'ma'an Sh'mecha,* for Your sake, or for the sake of Your Name, and other such variations. Everything human beings desire and need is actually for the sake of the Divine. If human beings are fulfilled, they will be able to serve God more completely. And furthermore, if human beings are both a part of God and created in God's image, then fulfilling human beings' needs is equivalent to fulfilling God's own needs.

It now becomes apparent why Rabbi Nahman allowed for this kind of prayer to take place in the vernacular. This was, however, revolutionary, and brilliant. No longer

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[202] Ibid., p. 148.
[203] Jacobs, p. 23.
[204] Ibid.

did the language of prayer have to present a barrier to the words of the heart. Prayers could flow like the Psalms, personally and emotionally. Rabbi Nathan's prayers are in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic; interestingly, he decided not to write them in Yiddish but in the language in which *Likutei Moharan* itself was written.[205]

Likutei Tefillot in fact not only resembles aspects of the Psalms, but as we have seen in chapter 2 it utilizes texts directly from the Psalms' poetry. These prayers are so full of emotion that they beg the question, does private prayer need to be born of deep anguish? What about joy? Can one simply have a basic desire to talk with the Creator without needing to pour one's heart out in either sadness or gratitude?

What is important is that contemplative prayer is meant to be transformative, from a recognition of the self as separate from God to a distinct experience of loss of self, falling into God. "If, when the Hasid stood up to pray, he did not do so in order to attain the 'casting off of corporeality,' the loss of his attachment to this world, so as to ascend above time and nature and to reach the perfect unity, the Divine 'Nothing,' he felt he had done nothing of any spiritual value or significance at all."[206]

In fact, the very goal of contemplative, private prayer is transformation. There is a story told by Rabbi Zelman M. Schachter-Shalomi about his early experiences with prayer. "One day, Papa is under the *tallis* and I hear him crying. 'Papa,' I say, 'Why are you crying? Who hit you?' Papa responds, 'I was talking to God.' I ask, 'Does it hurt

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[205] Perhaps this was in order to utilize language directly from LM itself; at any rate, since Rabbi Nathan was so clearly fluent in Hebrew, this was as if he were writing in his own vernacular, and this should not present a barrier to anyone who either wishes to use this as an aid to their own prayers, or to write their own.

[206] Schatz Uffenheimer, p. 168.

when you talk to God?' 'No, it doesn't hurt when you talk to God; you're just sad that you waited so long since talking to God.'"[207]

Tears are a very real part of transformation. We can see this dramatically represented in the Zohar. "The zoharic characters are forever overcome by the task of revealing the mysterious secrets of faith, and they express this emotional burden and difficulty at every turn."[208] We see this displayed in the weeping that takes place: "Time and again... [the character] will pause from his stream of exclamatory rhetoric to weep before continuing with his discourse."[209] This "act of weeping often functions as a transitional point.... The character will arrive at new realizations and fresh insights into his own role as a revealer of secrets through the very gesture of weeping itself. In the scene of revelation, where ambivalence dominates and fear abounds, the act of weeping becomes a kind of axial point upon which the entire experience of the speaker turns."[210] Weeping here is associated directly with revelation. It is the cause of the revelation to a character, signaling that character to be worthy of receiving this type of understanding.[211] It signals the very presence of God: "How does he know that Divinity is near? Through the mere vision of his own tears."[212]

These ideas function within the realm of mystical prayer as well as mystical drama and texts. Rabbi Nahman describes the process of prayer as "breaking the heart." Once the defenses the ego erects are broken down, pouring out the deepest thoughts buried in the heart becomes possible. Or, in comparing this process to the Zoharic

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[207] Weiner, p. xv.
[208] Fishbane, "Tears of Disclosure," p. 26.
[209] Fishbane, "Tears of Disclosure," p. 29.
[210] Ibid.
[211] "The very fact that he has become able to weep serves as a divine sign of approval. Hence we may conclude that the *human* tears are the physical manifestation of positive divine Will." Fishbane, "Tears of Disclosure," p. 33
[212] Fishbane, "Tears of Disclosure," p. 33.

narrative, when the heart is broken and opened, the person becomes worthy to receive the revelation that prayer can affect. The worshipper becomes worthy, not only to speak with God, but to receive an answer. And those very tears signal that God is indeed present in that anguish.

Tears can also be a sign of joy and gratitude. The nature of personal prayer would seem to suggest that speaking with God necessarily is an emotional matter. This is not to say that if one does not immediately feel deep emotion, that one should not pray, or that in fact one is not actually praying.

Joy, as expressed in Hasidic teachings, also needs to be deep and emotionally felt. *Hitlahavut,* as we have mentioned before, a "burning enthusiasm of the heart,"[213] is the extreme emotional state in which one should pray, and that is the type of joy and gratitude one should attempt to feel according to Hasidic teachings. Some texts contradict the emphasis on tears. As we find in Keter Shem Tov, a collection of early teachings attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov, "Prayer recited with great joy is undoubtedly significant and more acceptable to God than prayer recited in a melancholy fashion with tears."[214] But most often, while love and joy are held higher than tears, the two poles of love and fear are seen as both necessary for human beings' approach to God: "The principle is that before a man begins to pray to God he should be filled with love and fear."[215]

Thus this tension between joy and yearning is deeply rooted. While it is clear that serving God with joy is one of the utmost goals for Rebbe Nahman,[216] these prayers are

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[213] Jacobs, p. 21.
[214] *Keter Shem Tov* p. 25b.
[215] Ibid. p. 26a.
[216] See Lamm, "Joy and Dejection," *The Religious Thought of Hasidism.*

also full of tension and longing and desire, and in some cases, the yearning is so deep that one feels very close to despair. This tension is important today as well; yearning is so deeply a part of human nature and life, and it can lead to making requests of God, one of the most natural ways of entering into the conversation . But the aspect of joy must be present in life and in prayer for this to be a faithful representation of Rebbe Nahman's teachings, and I would argue, for us to live as full human beings. Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef of Polennoye explains: "There are two types of prayer. The first is based on love [of God alone, not on some felt personal need]. The second comes from a heart broken by poverty and affliction. Each type [is important] in its own time, and the second is equally acceptable in spite of being recited with pain and sadness."[217] He does go on to explain, however, that the highest goal is to serve God through love, "for ahavah (love) is the numerical equivalent of ehad (unity).... When [one] performs a mitzvah not as an act of love, but as a commandment of man learned by rote (Isa. 29:13), sadly and sluggishly, it accounts for only one organ."[218] But when one performs that mitzvah out of love, all 613 mitzvot have been accomplished in one.

One could argue that Nahman's greatest teaching is to live life with joy and not in despair. "Man's loftiest quality is the spirit of joyfulness. If joy is derived from doing a mitzvah, it [produces] a yihud (unification) that is superior to everything.[219] Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer affirms this characterization in her work. She argues that "three thought-provoking imperatives were intertwined in Hasidism from its very beginning:

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[217] R. Yaakov Yosef of Polennoye, *Toledot Yaakov Yosef to Shelah*, s.v. veli nireh lefaresh (selected and translated in Lamm, p. 192).
[218] Ibid., p. 193.
[219] Ibid. p. 196. While this is not from Rabbi Nachman's own words, this teaching reflects the kind of spirit that Rabbi Nachman brought into the teachings of Hasidism.

never to despair, to be sad, or to be regretful."[220] One goal of prayer is to make it possible to never dwell within these three experiences. This is why Rabbi Nahman advocated selecting fixed times in which to pour out one's heart in anguish, and then to leave that behind to enjoy the rest of one's time in joy.[221] Thus, both yearning and joy occupy significant places within Rabbi Nahman's teachings. Sadness and gratitude are both a part of Rabbi Nahman's understanding of spiritual psychology.

It is important to emphasize that according to Rabbi Nahman, a broken heart is not the same thing as sadness (atzvut). "Sadness is expressed in anger and irritability, whereas broken-heartedness is like a son cleansing himself before his father, or a child crying and complaining that he has been set far from his father. The latter type is dearly beloved by God. It would be best for man to experience such a 'broken heart' all day long. But, because most people would easily be led from a broken heart to sadness, which is exceedingly injurious, as I have explained many times, one ought to set aside some period during the day to pray with a 'broken heart,' restricting his broken-heartedness to that period alone, while the rest of the day is spent in joy."[222] Broken-heartedness thus reflects the love between a human being and God, and the intense desire to live up to God's desires of us. But joy is the way to freedom, the path away from the "idolatry" of sadness.[223]

The theme of distractions during the process of prayer, and how to deal with these problems, is noted often in Hasidic teachings. As Rabbi Zakok ha-Kohen of Lublin explains in his *Zidkat ha-Zaddik*, "fantasies especially threaten to overcome us during

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[220] Schatz-Uffenheimer, p. 93.
[221] See Lamm, "Joy and Dejection."
[222] *Likkutei Etzot*, Hitbodedut, no. 23 (selected and translated in Lamm, p. 397).
[223] *Likutei Etzot, Simhah*, nos. 7, 10, 26, 27 (selected and translated in Lamm, p. 400).

prayer."[224] Hasidic masters of prayer developed an entire philosophy about what to do when unwanted thoughts disturb our prayers. These thoughts contribute to the idea of "the lack of devotion in prayer"[225] spoken of by the sages. But as the Ba'al Shem Tov taught, and as is recorded in Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, kavanah depends on accepting the *darga*, or step, on which the worshipper finds himself, and progressing from there.[226] Everyone, even the masters, were susceptible to these distractions. Even they had to strive for ever higher levels of *kavanah*, and ever deeper levels of concentration.

This kind of *kavanah*, with its intention focused upon deep connection to God, nearly eliminates the need for a fixed structure of the words. When one knows the words to use, one should do so. But, when unschooled in traditional prayers, even reciting the letters are enough.

> "One who reads the words of prayer with great devotion may come to see the lights within the letters, even though one does not understand the meaning of the words one speaks. Such prayer has great power; mistakes in reading are of no importance. A father has a young child whom he greatly loves. Even though the child has hardly learned to speak, his father takes pleasure in listening to his words."[227]

Rabbi Nathan's prayers are comprised of many ideas, and he prays for a wide variety of things. While the ultimate goal of his prayers is *dveikut* (communion with God by way of *hitlahavut, yichud,* tears, and joy), each prayer focuses on a specific smaller goal. Some such goals are letting go; gaining perspective; help in figuring out life; wanting to feel the basic sense of trust that there is order and meaning in the universe. Others include wanting to rid oneself of shame and lowliness, and cleave to holiness; finding the

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[224] R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Zidkat ha-Zaddik*, no. 209 (selected and translated in Lamm, p. 213).
[225] Ibid.
[226] *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, Amud Hatefillah, no. 48, p. 118.
[227] *Liqutim Yekarim* 2a (selected and edited in Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 102).

antidote to loneliness; trying to live in the moment. These are all things we could conceive of asking for today, in our own ways.

Among many of these prayers we find the theme of *teshuvah*, turning or repentance, which is a general theme of Rabbi Nahman's work: "Even when one is sure that he has repented in a perfect way, he should repent again: repentance for his original repentance, because initially his repentance was relative to his perceptions at that time. After repentance, however, one's knowledge and perception of God surely deepen, and in comparison with his present understanding, the previous one was, as it were, gross and corporeal."[228]

Some prayers deal with self judgment and humility, and accepting God's Kingship. In other words, remembering the first commandment "*Ani Adonai*", or, I am God, and you are not. These prayers confess sins or wrongs, and dream of God remembering both the worshipper's good deeds and his ancestors' relationships as a connection to God's grace. Others ask for help in accomplishing the deep goals of prayer: *dveikut, bitul ha-yesh,* faith, joy. Rabbi Nathan seeks help in becoming who he is supposed to be in the world; finding balance; purging fear, doubt and desire; and breaking down the barriers to prayer and to life. In all of these, prayer is a partnership between God and man. It is the process of talking to an old friend, where one does not have to explain everything, because God already knows the whole story; and yet, putting ideas and thoughts into words makes them more real. Prayer is, then, a self-awakening: *l'hit'orer*. Let us examine the contents of Rabbi Nathan's prayers, and how he is able to pray for that which he needs.

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[228] *Likkutei Etzot*, Teshuva 7:6 (translated in Lamm, p. 368).

Prayer 7 in Likutei Tefillot is focused on *emunah,* on faith. Both LM and LT begin with faith; LM begins with the acknowledgment that lack of faith has brought exile, and LT begins by asking for God to "plant faith in our hearts."[229] For Rabbi Nahman, *emunah* is attached to prayer, which "transcends nature," and thus "is a miracle."[230] The miracle is the deep faith in God. Rabbi Nathan asks for God to assist in both creating and recognizing that miracle, by recounting the miracles in the life of the people of Israel. "'You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and the strength of Your hand...You took us out of Egypt and redeemed us from the most terrible exile...You worked miracles and wonders in Egypt and at the Red Sea."[231] The primary importance here is that God "confounded the laws of nature,"[232] and this is a reminder that God is the master of miracles, the source of *emunah.* The *kavanah* here is to experience and remember who God is and what God has done. Meanwhile, the worshipper reminds God that He should continue to be the miracle maker He was in the past.

Rabbi Nathan begins from a value, an idea, or a teaching from Rabbi Nahman's work. He seeks to describe that idea, reminding both himself and God of the importance of it (in this case, faith and miracles), and then asks for help in achieving that goal. Sometimes he asks for God to do these things for him: "Let my faith in You be true and sound,"[233] while other times he asks for help: "*v'ta'azrieni,*" "Help me to 'put Adonai before me constantly....'"[234] Here, he also utilizes the Psalms to know what to ask for,

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[229] LT, p. 137.
[230] LM Vol. II, p. 3.
[231] LT, p. 136.
[232] Ibid., p. 138.
[233] LT, p. 141.
[234] Ibid.

quoting exactly,[235] in asking for God to help him achieve the goal the tradition sets out for the Jewish people.

In other prayers, Nathan calls upon God's knowledge of him personally: "You know the great beauty, the holiness and goodness I have inside me. It's just that they've been suppressed and locked away in a long, bitter exile for years and years...."[236] He is reminding God that these qualities exist in him, and he is also reminding himself. If he knows those qualities are there, then he can strive with God's help to become the best self possible.

Other times, Nathan not only wants to arrive at a higher place, but at a place of self-nullification: "May it be Your will to completely remove all pride from me.... Let me nullify myself to the point where I will look on myself as being even less significant than I really am."[237] He wants to be drawn close to God, but "I feel so remote from you."[238] The very process of speaking to God brings him just a little bit closer, and so he pours out his heart, with precisely the passion and love that the value of *hitlahavut* demands.

Both *Seyder Tkhines* and Rabbi Naomi Levy's prayers seek to do similar things with different styles. Rabbi Levy prays: "When I am feeling self-pity, God, help me to see beyond myself. When I am feeling despair, restore me to hope. When I shut people out, help me to believe in the healing power of companionship. Remind me that I am not alone, that I am needed, that I am heard, and that You are with me, now and always."[239] *Kavanah* is essential to Rabbi Naomi Levy's prayers too; in fact, they have no definitive

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[235] Psalms 16:7
[236] Ibid., p. 415.
[237] Ibid., p. 329.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Naomi Levy, *To Begin Again*, p. 53

structure that is mandatory. They openly and simply express the needs and desires that everyone feels. There are prayers for specific desires, just like in *Likutei Tefillot*; in fact, the titles present on the contents page show exactly where to look for the theme of one's choice: "A prayer for those days when life spins out of control," or "a prayer during pregnancy," or "a prayer to fight temptation." The reader may not know the teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, and he or she may not even know Torah; but everyone knows, upon a little bit of thought, the things that are difficult in life, and the things for which we are grateful. Rabbi Levy encourages the reader to turn every one of those things into prayer.

For *Seyder Tkhines*, *kavanah* is also an integral component. "*Seyder Tkhines* and other seventeenth-century Yiddish prayers have rubrics that stipulate recitation either "with *kavone*" or "with great *kavone*."[240] The prayers therein are often for God to accept the words of our mouths, though "at this time we do not have all the words to praise Your name..."[241] or for protection and forgiveness. But they too, like Rabbi Nathan's and Rabbi Levy's prayers, contain specific thoughts for specific occasions. They are oriented toward the people who will be using them: women. "And may I become pregnant in purity.... And let no shame come to me, or my husband or children."[242] Other prayers are more universal, for health; strength against cravings and desires; protection against bad thoughts and the evil inclination[243]; and so forth.

From these three works, we see that the particular intentions may be specific to the person and the time period; however, the need for *kavanah* is universal. Any of them

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[240] Kay, p. 117.
[241] Ibid., p. 132.
[242] Ibid., p. 135-6.
[243] Ibid., p. 134-6.

might be used in formulating one's own prayers; either by focusing on the idea therein, or by actually using the texts themselves as a starting point. Certainly, it is possible to pray for the things in life we know from experience will bring goodness, healing, peace, and other such desirous conditions of the world. However, knowing the tradition and the values and texts of Jewish life can only strengthen the worshipper in the challenge of talking to God.

Chapter 4
God: What's In A Name?

Who is God in these prayers, and where does that place the worshippers? Knowing who one is talking to can shed light on the nature of the prayers; especially when those prayers contain so many names, or epithets, for God. As the Maggid of Mezritch teaches: "when a person prays in an ordinary way, the words of prayer have no life of their own. It is only the name of God appearing in their midst that gives them life. Thus when you recite the words: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord...,' life does not enter the words until the word 'Lord' is uttered. But when a true master of prayer recites the words every word is a name of God. 'Blessed' is a name, 'Thou' is a name."[244]

The names of God are a difficult matter. Entire treatises have been written on this, and it is not my intention here to delve deeply into the subject. "The problem of the names of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is so complex that movements toward the solution may be impeded, distorted, or even blocked by its formulation in the singular."[245] This problem occurs wherever God is addressed or discussed, be it in the scriptures or in the liturgy. It is not permissible to know or pronounce the true name of God, and yet Jewish religious lives circle around this idea or being we cannot name. Therefore, since prayer demands a focus, that is to say, a direction or idea in which to pray, God is called by a variety of names.

Dr. Lawrence Hoffman contends that who we perceive God to be determines the wording of our prayers.[246] If we see God as distant, majestic, all powerful, then we might

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[244] *Maggid Devarav Le-Ya'aqov* 17a (selected and edited in Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 50). .
[245] Brichto, p. 3.
[246] This is also true for the music we use in the synagogue. The music of the 1950's, a time in which Reform Judaism perceived God as transcendent, distant, grand and impossible to approach, reflected this

be inclined to ask for miracles and world peace, and to ask for things that pertain not to our small lives but on a national and worldly scale. These things are large and near impossible to attain, and we might spend our time praising God's wonders and mysteries. If on the other hand, one perceives God as the creator of the world who subsequently vanished from involvement in human affairs, then one might in his prayers wish to assert values and morals, and appeal to the highest potentials within the human being, while not asking for something this type of God cannot, or will not, achieve. If one holds an image of God as intimately involved in human affairs, deeply connected with each individual, one might pray to God as a parent, or ask for small personal assistance. If one perceives God to be the conscience, the best in humanity, a sort of Jiminy Cricket figure, then one might ask for strength, wisdom, courage, and the like.[247]

This "naming" of God is in line with previous Jewish, and Hasidic, tradition. The Besht is widely known to have used names "as a means for his healing."[248] On the one hand, this may be seen as a form of magical practice, utilizing names and in fact renaming in order to cause a person to recover from illness, be it spiritual or physical. However, giving creatures and things in the world names is the first task human beings are assigned to do in the world.[249] This task brings us closer to the nature of things, and brings us into a direct relationship with them. It is in this sense that the naming of God is of primary importance. For by naming God, we call upon God to become that which we need or want.

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grandeur and awe. Worshippers today rarely find this music compelling religiously, except perhaps on the High Holy Days, when our understanding of God is closer to this philosophic outlook.

[247] See Lawrence Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer.*

[248] Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 75.

[249] Genesis 1:28.

Nathan of Nemirov's god-view, derived from and contributing to Hasidism, determined the sort of prayers he wrote; the god-view of traditional Judaism informed *Seyder Techines*, and Rabbi Naomi Levy's post-modern god-view infuses her prayers. We can glimpse these viewpoints by the names of God used in these prayer-books.

The very first prayer in *Likutei Tefillot* is instructive. Many of Nathan's prayers begin with a string of epithets for God, and this is no different. "The prayers usually begin with a succession of invocations and descriptions of God that at once give a powerful sense of the awesome majesty of His presence."[250] "*Adonai Eloheinu v'lohei avoteinu,*" he begins, "Our Master, our God and God of our ancestors," You are "the one who hears prayers of His people Israel, You are the One who stirs up/shines Your compassion and your loving-kindness upon us..." Here, the reader attains a conclusive understanding of how Nathan perceives God. God is not only in relationship with Rabbi Nathan, but this God also knew his ancestors. God is his ruler, and he has a relationship with God through the fact that his ancestors did before him. God hears prayer; not only that, hears *Rabbi Nathan's* prayers, and the prayers of the people of Israel. God shines compassion upon the Jewish people, which means that even though God is the sovereign king and ruler, the worshipper is able to ask for what he needs, because God has been compassionate before and will be again. The prayer has hardly begun, and yet Nathan has already told God who he needs God to be in order for him to utter these words.

Many of Nathan's prayers begin with *Ribono Shel Olam*, Master of the Universe, or other versions of this, such as *Ribon kol ha'olamim* (master of all worlds) or *Adon Kol*, or *Mara d'alma kola.*[251] In Nathan's view, God can accomplish anything; anything and

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[250] *The Fiftieth Gate,* Vol. 1, p. 42.
[251] Ibid, p. 458.

everything is possible. He uses this phrase both because the tradition perceives God in this way, and because in order for prayer to be meaningful to Rabbi Nathan, God needs to be in control, aware, and listening. It is as if only one utters the truest and most honest words, if only one makes himself as worthy as he can possibly be, then God will make miracles happen.

Sometimes an entire paragraph of the prayers is spent calling God by a name, in other words, defining the One to whom Nathan is speaking.[252] So many of these names, or epithets, express what God does. For instance, God has compassion upon us, so the name becomes "the One who is full of compassion," or "the Compassionate One who is full of compassion."[253] Other names include "the One who chooses the prayers of His servant," and so on. These names are used to introduce, or further, a theme of the prayer, both here and in public worship. This tradition is seen clearly in the traditional prayer book. The prayers of the Amide first express a notion about God, and then ask for God to help now in the way God helped "then". The prayer concludes with a blessing, "Blessed are you God, the one who..." does what I am asking You to do. For example, the prayer for wisdom: "*Ata chonen l'adam da'at, umelamed l'enosh binah*, You give to human beings knowledge, and teach them wisdom" suggests in its very definition of who God is that which the worshipper wants from God. That is to say, it is traditional to encourage God to help by praising that quality one needs at the moment.

A beautiful example of this is in Prayer #13. The prayer begins: "Yeshiva ham'romim umachgiach hatachtonim,"[254] "You, the one who sits on high and watches with care over the lowest of low; God, You who are so awesome and yet you still are

[252] *Fiftieth Gate Vol.* 1, p. 44.
[253] Ibid., p. 50.
[254] Ibid., p. 293.

concerned with us down here." Then Rabbi Nathan can ask "watch over us, protect us, and take perfect care of us."[255] Later, he tells God that God is the one who hears all prayers. It is a description as well as a plea: God, You are the one who hears everyone's prayers, so hear mine now. It is an image of God who is awesome yet caring, sitting on a throne on high and yet able and willing to have an intimate personal relationship with every person down on the earth. This is why Rabbi Nathan has the freedom, indeed the need, to pour out his heart to God. "*Habocher bitfillat avadav*" -- God is the one who "chooses the prayers of His servants"[256]; God desires and needs these prayers.

Other epithets for God also show an awesome power combined with a gentle, sometimes parental, care for His people Israel. God is "*Adonai Elohim Emet,*" the true Lord our God, and the one who "*mechayei meitim,*" revives the dead. God is also "*tov umeitiv lakol,*" the one who is good to and brings goodness upon everything, and "*Avinu shebashamayim,*" our Father in the heavens. This God "*oseh tzeddakot,*" does righteous and charitable things, and "*tzofeh b'elyon anuchim,*" knows the "shame and pain of the downcast."[257] Therefore this is a God to whom even the lowliest creature can petition, even the humblest person can address.

Many of these epithets are drawn directly from the traditional prayer-book: God of our Fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob; Our Father in Heaven, and so on. But it is not that Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov is directly asserting that we have to draw from the words of our ancestors in order to pray. Instead, this is so ingrained in his consciousness that the language he uses necessarily echoes the language of the prayer-book. For Nathan of Nemirov, God *is* the One who... does wonders, revives the dead,

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[255] Ibid.
[256] *The Fiftieth Gate*, p. 187.
[257] Ibid., p. 90.

chooses the worship of His people. If this is so, then it becomes easier to ask for God to do these things. Just like in the Amidah, he utilizes the things God has done to promote things God should do. It is in some ways an expression of faith. If one knows God has saved his ancestors in the past, then one knows that God can save him in the present, and his descendants in the future.

Seyder Tkhines also begins with identifying God by name, both to remind God and to remind the worshipper of the relationship that exists between them. The first *tkhine* begins: "Lord of all the world, God, my God, and God of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Great and strong and awesome God, and Lord over the whole world, above and below, One Lord over everything on earth, every creature, flesh and blood; and all that grows under the sun; and Lord of the angels in Heaven above; and of the sun, the moon, and the stars; Everything is of His making; and He governs alone..."[258] and this is not nearly the end of the descriptive epithets that begin this prayer. In fact, two full pages are devoted to describing and praising God. Then a new definition, much more brief, begins: "So I, Your devoted maid and daughter; was created from the earth; and must return to the earth."[259] This too continues, but only for a paragraph, before the worshipper is able to ask for what she requires. Her prayer brings her before God "to beg before You, like a pauper at the door of a rich man."[260] This is the ultimate in humility that she seeks to establish, again both to remind herself of who she is, and to remind God that she knows this.

Rabbi Naomi Levy does not define God so expressly. Usually, she calls God simply "God," and does not add other epithets. The things for which the prayers ask

[258] Kay, p. 126.
[259] Ibid., p. 127.
[260] Ibid., p. 128.

define God's powers and nature. "I thank You God," she says, "for creating me as I am."[261] God is her creator, who did not just create the first human being, but actually created the person worshipping. God is also a guide and teacher in the prayer which asks "God, give me strength to combat despair and fear. Show me how to put my pain into perspective. Teach me to have faith in the new day that is coming."[262] Her God is not one who necessarily directly answers prayer. She prays "may my prayers be answered," but she does not ask that God provide those answers. Rabbi Levy does not express directly how, and even if, prayers are answered, but it is ultimately not important. The process of talking to God is the thing that is of the utmost importance, whether one believes in a God who answers prayer, heals the sick and the like, or a God who is there to listen and provide strength. Her God is like a parent of a child who lives far away. The child now has her own family, and calls her mother to talk about trials, joys, hardships, success and defeat. Her mother can sympathize and relate, and pour out her empathy. But she cannot instantly appear to help.

Margaret Moers Wenig writes about this in her article "God is a Woman, and She is growing older." Hers is a beautiful and sad image, of a God who is Herself lonely and "longing for her children, her playful ones.... God is home tonight, turning the pages of her book. 'Come home,' she wants to say to us, 'come home.' But she won't call, for she is afraid we will say 'no.'"[263] This God suffers along with humanity, suffering "the sadness of losing all that she holds dear."[264]

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[261] *Talking to God*, p. 24.
[262] *Talking to God*, p. 29.
[263] Wenig, p. 2.
[264] Ibid.

Thus, traditional relationships with God of *Seyder Tkhines* and *Likutei Tefillot* are not the ones found in Rabbi Naomi Levy's poems and prayers, and they do not have to be the ones used today. It can be helpful to express to whom one is speaking; to say, for example, "God, you who hear our prayers, hear my prayer now," or, "God, you heal the sick: so heal my loved one now." By granting these epithets upon God, the worshipper bestows upon God these qualities. With regards to a value like courage, the worshipper could say "Please, God, you who are the source of strength, give me the courage to fight against this cancer that is sucking my strength away." By defining to whom one is speaking, the worshipper defines the relationship he wishes to have with the Divine Presence in the world.

Conclusion
Lessons For Our Own Private Prayers

How do we start? The truth is, we pray every day of our lives, without even knowing it. "Why don't you know that you are praying? Because you've allowed religion to define the word 'prayer' for you. But prayer ... is not primarily an institutional function. It is a natural part of human existence."[265] Surely there are ways to shape these natural prayers. The more schooled we are in public prayers, the more understanding and connection we have to Torah, the more our private prayers will sound connected to our traditions and values. We can use names of God, we can start with someone else's prayer and flow into our own thoughts. Or we can simply open up our mouths to pour out letters and ideas and whatever we feel. The important thing is to just start.

What do these authors hope to achieve with their private prayers? What can we hope to achieve ourselves? In other words, does prayer work? There are many discussions about this subject. There are several objectives of the prayers we have studied. Seyder Tkhines seeks to fulfill the daily obligation to pray; but it also seeks to invite relationship between women and God. Likutei Tefillot aims to transform Torah and values the worshipper seeks to create in the world into prayers; to pour out the soul toward God, and thereby gain strength and assistance in dealing with life's problems, religious and otherwise. Rabbi Naomi Levy's goals are also to create prayer from the daily occurrences of life; to connect daily life with God and Jewish values.

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[265] Weiner, p. 5.

"Does prayer change God's will,"[266] people ask. "The early thinkers asked how prayer can be efficacious. Does it not imply, heaven forbid, a change in God's will? Before the prayer, He willed things one way, and afterwards His will is altered."[267] Perhaps God is altered or strengthened by our prayers. And perhaps it is we who are strengthened, we who are altered. Either way, we change the world in which we live by our words.

What are we allowed to pray for? These prayers start with values, and ask for help in reaching them. They are not about attaining material things. We need to know what values we want for ourselves and for our world, and then we will know how to pray.

There is a common experience that I find with regard to belief in God. Often, someone will tell me that they do not believe in God, because of a bad experience of the past. One man explained that he no longer sets foot in the synagogue because God let him down. His father died at a young age, and this man prayed for him to live. Obviously, his prayer was not answered, and as he argued, that means there is no god. He never learned that perhaps the god he had believed in previously did not exist, but that there are many other options. There is Margie Wenig's God, who hears prayer and feels sadness but does not perform miracles by healing the dying. There is the God of Rabbi Levy, who provides strength and comfort, who is present in the world and in any person's life who chooses to know God. There is the God who is responsible for the creation of Good and Evil, who gives us standards and morals by which to live. There are so many

[266] Lamm, p. 187.
[267] Ibid., p. 189.

experiences one can have of God; like "white" light refracting through a prism and creating a rainbow of separate colors.

When someone tells Rabbi Eddie Feinstein that they do not believe in God, he asks them "which God do you not believe in?"

What lessons can we take with us with regard to synagogue worship? Perhaps when we teach prayer in synagogues, whether to children or adults, we are trying to inspire them to private prayer while engaging in public worship. There are significant differences between the *avodah shebalev*, the worship of the heart that we do in the synagogue, and the outpouring of the soul that should take place privately. Perhaps if we draw a distinction between these two forms, we might create more reasonable expectations among our congregations for what we actually accomplish in the synagogue, while at the same time teaching them how to discover and develop their own private and personal relationship with God at intimate times.

Rabbi Karen Bender writes "While some people prefer their Shabbat services to provide an individual experience of serenity, calm, and meditation, I think the primary value that Shabbat services present is the opportunity for us to worship and celebrate together as a community. After all, Shabbat is twenty-five hours long, of which synagogue services consume only one or two hours. We have the remaining twenty-three hours to spend in private contemplation, take a walk, breathe the outside air, and rest. Serenity and meditation can be achieved in solitude. But for celebration, we need

community."[268] We need it all, and we are getting very little of it these days in most places.

A Concluding Drash

We live in a world of constant noise. As I write these words, my husband is on the phone with a client; one television set is blasting Fox News Channel; and one is less loudly providing the background noise of the Lord of the Rings. Then there is the periodic sound of the cats playing with toys with bells, and the microwave heating the occasional snack. Everyone has certain household sounds they are familiar with; maybe it is the freeway outside your window; maybe it is the dog next door, maybe the baby crying or gurgling, or the kids fighting or playing.

Have we become so accustomed to these sounds, or do we need to get away from them every so often? Of course, we all know the answer to that question when we tell each other, "God, if only I could ... just get away, have a vacation, have an hour to myself," you fill in the blank. So where do we go?

Some of us come to synagogue. And yet ... these next words may seem radical, coming from a Jewish professional, one who believes so strongly in the synagogue. Here, there is still noise. We spend the better part of an hour, or more, not in silence, not in quiet meditation or solitude, but in song. Not that there is anything wrong with that; we fill the room with our voices, with instruments, with joy and spirit. This actually fulfills the words of the Psalms, that every soul should praise God, and that we should do

[268] Bender, p. 153.

it with cymbals and trumpets and strings and harmonies of all kinds.[269] Joy and lightness of spirit is one pole of our Jewish living, and without it, we would collapse.

But then where, if not here, do we get what we have been missing? Why do we often leave the synagogue unfulfilled, yearning? I believe Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav has the answer. The answer lies in solitude itself.

Hitbodedut. The very word itself implies that there is some work involved. The word is reflexive, meaning that one is doing something to oneself. It is an active aloneness, a process of making oneself alone so that there is room for God to find a way in. It is, to Rabbi Nahman, "a superior virtue, greater than all others."[270] The idea is to "seclude yourself for an hour or more in a room or a field to converse openly with your Creator, whether offering arguments or apologies, in words that are grateful, pacifying, and conciliatory."[271] Furthermore, he advocates that this conversation take place in your vernacular.

In the story of the Ark, Noah is commanded to build for the ark a window. The Ba'al Shem Tov interprets this word "ark" as actually meaning "word," so that the image becomes that of building a window for the word, through which the Divine might shine. This solitude is similar; the idea is to open yourself, even just a little bit, so that God can shine in.

Here is my plea to you, as a rabbi, a cantor, and a Jew: try it. Once, in a very difficult time in my life, a teacher recommended that I sit on my floor, and yell at God, pour out my heart in whatever words I could muster. I thought she was crazy. But I must

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[269] Psalm 150.
[270] Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov FIND
[271] Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov FIND

have been desperate enough to listen, and so one day I did it. Something inside me broke, so sufficiently at that moment that it could begin to be reset and repaired.

It is not easy to find the time. It is not easy either to find the energy, or to even know what to say. Many of us have always been more comfortable with the prayer book safely in our hands, knowing that our loss for words would not prevent us from speaking, because here were the lines given to us. It is tremendously difficult to find our own words. But according to the masters, it is possible because it is necessary; it is the only way to fulfillment.

It is necessary, but not sufficient. Do not think that by choosing Rabbi Nahman as your spiritual advisor you are off the hook from coming to Shul! Rabbi Nahman, while advocating solitude and prayer in the vernacular as the highest virtue, spoke within a context whereby public prayer was the given, an obligation. And in that public prayer, I submit to you, attaining joy is one of the highest goals. The Ba'al Shem Tov tells us that our prayers are better received in joy, that from the midst of praise, our prayers are heard and granted. And Moshe deLeon tells us that the secret of prayer is found in serving God with joy and coming before God with gladness, as the Psalm tells us "*Ivdu et Adonai b'simcha, bo'u l'fanav birnana.*"[272] The job is to awaken our gratitude; and the music and service of the synagogue are designed to enable us to do just that. If we pray privately, cultivating a deep relationship with God, then we will free the synagogue to become what it alone can be: a place in which we assert the values and morals of the Jewish tradition, and a place in which be become part of a deeper, larger community.

That is not to say that praying in the synagogue should be without kavanah; instead, it is just as imperative that we worship together with intention. But know that we

[272] Psalms 100:3.

the worshippers are the only ones who can make this happen for ourselves. If the music does not call us to life, if the words themselves feel flat, we need to turn to the inner life of our public prayers.

We can define this kavanah for ourselves. When we chant the morning blessings, reflecting on the miracles of the every day, we can think about the things we could choose to see as miracles in our own lives. Did we wake up to the face of a loved one? Did we find the time to accomplish something we thought was unachievable? Did we even just survive another day?

When we sing *Mi Chamocha*, we can recall the greatness of the wonders that our ancestors witnessed and wrote about. Because there was once a great miracle, there is hope for the future too.

When we sing *Avinu Shebashamayim*, our prayer for Israel, we can feel the awesome reality that our Jewish nation has survived against such desperate odds, and we can recognize the power of the partnership between God and humanity in achieving great things in the world.

All of these ideas, and many more, can provide the optimism, the joyful subtext, for serving God out of gladness and gratitude. By doing these things, finding the time for deep private expression of our innermost thoughts, and coming together to cultivate our gratitude in the midst of our community, we might just find that peace of soul and gladness of being for which we search. And we might be able to go back to the noise, the televisions and the babies and the freeways, with a renewed sense of calm, with boundless energy to face a world still so in need of the work of our hands.

"A person may come to sense two kinds of movement taking place within him during prayer. At times you may feel the left hand of God pushing you away; at other times God's right hand draws you near. But even as you are pushed away, know still that this is only for the sake of your return. Even as you feel the might of God's left hand upon you, see that it is God Himself who touches you. This, too, accept in love, and, trembling, kiss the hand that pushes you – for in that very moment, the right hand awaits your coming near."[273]

[273] *Ketonet Passim* 43b (selected and edited in Green and Holtz, *Your Word Is Fire*, p. 87)

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