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DEBRA REED BLANK

Introduction

Certain teachers, whose influence continues to shape my thinking, marked my rabbinic education at JTS from 1984 to 1989. Noteworthy among them is Neil Gillman, from whom I have learned to think freely while holding fast to Conservative Judaism. I also studied with him informally while a PhD student and, now as his colleague, I continue to pick his brain. Although we have read many of the same books over the years, his insights compel me to see material I think I know well in a completely different way.

In his inimitable, impassioned fashion, Gillman has time and again told me that he does not know what spirituality is, does not grasp the concept, nor “get” what it is that so frets people. This claim of his has always seemed outrageous because to me the essence of spirituality seems so obvious. Moreover, his resistance to defining the term “spirituality” seems ironic, coming from an individual who has been my model of the spiritual quest.

As a twenty-year-late response to my teacher and friend’s expressions of bewilderment regarding spirituality, I was inspired to respond to a request in spring 2006 for papers for a conference on spirituality and rabbinic Judaism. This article is a longer, reworked version of the one that I presented at Beit Morasha, in Jerusalem in December of 2006. I am grateful to

the conference organizers (particularly Alon Goshen-Gottstein) who accepted my proposal and invited me to participate, and I am grateful for the constructive responses I received during those collegial four days of intellectual (and spiritual) growth. I dedicate this article to Neil Gillman, my rabbi, teacher, and friend.

Definitions

Liturgy can be easily defined as the texts used during the worship of the Deity. For methodological clarity, I observe the distinction between liturgy and prayer: liturgy designating what a community establishes as fixed, formularized, and public; prayer being private, idiosyncratic, and relatively more subject to change.¹ Liturgy, from the Greek *leitourgia* (worship of, service to the gods), corresponds most directly to the Jewish concept of *avodah*; whereas prayer, from the Latin *precari* (to beg, to entreat), corresponds more closely (as I shall argue) to *tahanunim*.² This distinction between liturgy and prayer describes two different kinds of behavior and attitude vis-à-vis the Deity; it then has important implications for spirituality.

Spirituality, “pertaining to the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the physical nature,” (according to my Random House-Webster’s dictionary, 2001) is more difficult to define, and perhaps “an intuitive understanding” of what it is might best approximate the mindset of those who use the term. Christian scholar Bernard McGinn cautions against a “single definition” of spirituality and urges one to view it “both as lived experience and as reflections on that experience. . . .”³ This *non*-definition of spirituality in turn frees me to propose two dynamic models of spirituality.⁴

Two Dynamic Models of Spiritual Experience (Movement)

The first could be labeled the “mystical” model, wherein spirituality is measured according to varying degrees of mindfulness or awareness of God’s presence. In this model, I imagine degrees of awareness of God arrayed on a dynamic continuum with (mere) appreciation for the Divine representing the least profound state of spirituality; progressing to a sense of apprehension; and ultimately to communion with the Divine, the state of most profound spiritual experience. Spiritual success is thus measured by how close

one moves toward God, and a mystical experience (*unio mystica*) is the ultimate goal or achievement.⁵ Given the personal, subjective nature of such experience, this means of assessing spirituality might seem to devalue a fixed, communal liturgy recited in unison, at appointed times, preferring instead personal prayer, be it apophatic (non-discursive) meditative focus or discursive personal outburst.⁶ Prayer, whether it is meditation or discourse, always has the movement toward the Deity as its primary goal, and ideally effects communion with the Deity. Hence, if spirituality is equal to mindfulness of God, then this kind of subjective prayerful worship is most efficacious for the individual.

A second model of spirituality would suggest that success should be measured by the degree to which a worship practice achieves a sense of what Victor Turner seminally termed *communitas*, in which the communal gathering and mutual performance (such as in a minyan) lead to a mystical sense of participation in a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts (a variant on the *unio mystica* idea).⁷ Using this standard, spiritual success depends solely upon the communal recitation of public liturgies because they create solidarity among those who participate; the simultaneous recitation of the liturgy unifies the people. Shared liturgies unite individuals into congregations and further unite those individual congregations with a larger whole, both synchronically and diachronically. (Hence the beauty of being able to worship in a synagogue in Paris, Toronto, Buenos Aires, or Jerusalem even if you don't speak the *lingua franca*; likewise, there is the beauty of knowing that the liturgy you recite is what your grandparents and theirs before them recited.) Even those who recite the liturgy while alone regard themselves, and are regarded, as participating in the larger community. (So, for example, when worshiping alone the Jew is part of the community, proven by the fact that his/her liturgical expressions are still phrased in the first-person plural, for example, “*our* God,” and “heal *us*.”)⁸ Liturgies express a movement toward other individuals,⁹ and spirituality is to be found in the bonding that results: in this case, not so much a union with the Deity as a union with one's neighbor, namely, *communitas*.¹⁰ However, personal prayer—subjective or idiosyncratic—will not effect this kind of *communitas* spirituality.

Thus, I have presented two means by which to assess the spiritual success of a worship practice—whether it results in movement toward the

Deity or movement toward one's neighbor—and by these two we shall now consider the establishment of the fixed, formal, public liturgy in the early rabbinic period.

Rabbinic Worship Enables *Communitas* and *Unio Mystica*

When reviewing the limited textual evidence we have,¹¹ we notice the expressed rabbinic intention of establishing a homogeneous liturgy that unifies and identifies the Jewish community, underscored by the exclusive use of the first-person plural: Shmuel said, “One should never disassociate oneself from the community [in worship]” (B. Berakhot 49b).¹² After initially taking pains to phrase it in the singular, the textual record then casts the Traveler's Prayer into the preferred plural language (changing “my God . . . who leads *me*” into “our God . . . who leads *us*,” etc.). Abayye's admonition there, “One must always connect oneself to the community [in worship],” echoes Shmuel's rule of the earlier century (B. Berakhot 29b–30a).

Similarly, all the language in all the standardized *berakhot* is cast into the first-person plural even to the extent that biblical quotes are changed: For example, “heal me, Lord, and I will be healed” of Jeremiah 17:14 is brazenly changed from the singular to the plural in the eighth *berakhah* of the weekday *Amidah*. The rabbinic goal was obviously the inculcation of *communitas* through a standardized liturgy that emphasizes, word after word, the individual's inclusion in the community even when worshipping privately.¹³

The establishment of a fixed liturgy has obvious theological advantages: it not only unites the community but also can be memorized and therefore used as a didactic tool for transmission of creed, encouraging a uniform theological stance toward basic concepts like creation, revelation, deity description, and eschatology. The rabbis instinctively understood that a fixed liturgical text was necessary for the formation and definition of their peculiar religious community.

Whether the liturgical texts (e.g., of the *Amidah*) were composed all at once or gradually coalesced is irrelevant; the textual record clearly describes the promulgation of a fixed liturgy in the early rabbinic period.¹⁴ Even the contemporaneous variants that are recorded are very minor; for example, Tosefta Berakhot 3:25 describes both *Birkat ha-Minim* and *Birkat Z'keinim*

as confluents of four, more thematically specific, *berakhot*, and our customary two *berakhot* of David and Yerushalayim are united there as one. Additionally, M. Berakhot 5:3 gives examples of how one is not permitted to add to the standard text of *Amidah*: “If someone says, Your mercies shall reach even unto the bird’s nest, or Your name will be remembered for benefit, or We thank, we thank—silence him!” What is striking to me is how trivial these tannaitic variants are, suggesting that the idea of a fixed liturgy seems to have quickly taken root, no matter how it originated.

However, there is also coeval record of resistance to a fixed liturgy, recorded forthrightly in the Mishnah as R. Eliezer’s objection to the establishment of this fixed text: Rabbi Eliezer says, “If one fixes [the language of] his *Amidah*, it does not qualify as *tahanunim*” (M. Berakhot 4:4). He uses the evocative word *tahanunim* to prove his point, thereby alluding to Psalm 28:6, “YHVH is bountiful,¹⁵ because He heard the cry of my heart-felt supplications (*tahanunai*),” implying that the *only* thing God hears is *tahanunim*.¹⁶ Likewise, Avot 2:18: Rabbi Shimon says, “One should take care when reciting the Sh’ma and the *Amidah*; and when praying, do not make your prayer fixed, rather [appeals for] mercy and *tahanunim*. . . .”¹⁷

We can detect resistance to a fixed liturgy not only in Eliezer’s and Shimon’s cries for *tahanunim*, but in the practice of a wide variety of *tannaitic* and *amoraic*, Palestinian and Babylonian, rabbinic leaders, of making personal additions to the end of the *Amidah* (recorded in Berakhot 16b–17a). Presumably these examples were transmitted and recorded in order to serve as models for what one is encouraged to do in order to strive toward *tahanunim*. The implication of this lengthy passage seems clear: the fixed liturgy on its own is incomplete spiritual expression; personal prayer must amplify it, and this is how you do it. . . .¹⁸

Another record validating the need for personal, meditative, prayer time is the reference to pious people warming up before the *Amidah* (M. Berakhot 5:1).¹⁹ Here the recognition seems to be that the prescribed, fixed liturgical recitation needs to be jump-started by a personal, prayerful communion with the Divine, lest the *Amidah* not be effective communion on its own.²⁰

Liturgiologists observe that—no matter the tradition—public liturgies usually make room for the insertion of private prayer. True to form, in the Jewish case a fixed liturgy gets established, and the prayers, the *tahanunim*, are added around its edges (and ultimately formalized as *Pesukei Dezimra*,

the psalm sequence preceding the morning statutory liturgy, and *Elohai n'tsor/Tahanun*, meditations following the *Amidah*). Thus, movement toward *communitas* and the Divine is ensured in the liturgical framework.

I conclude that the rabbis adopted, or made their peace with, a fixed liturgy, but they recognized that it was incomplete *by itself* for spiritual success. More was needed to fully appreciate, apprehend, or commune with the Deity. That “more” was personal prayer, even if done in a communal setting. I suggest that the rabbis intuitively understood that the fixed liturgy is incomplete by itself because it—being liturgy, i.e., communal and fixed—is designed to effect *communitas*, whereas private prayer will best effect *personal* communion with the Divine.

The Little Engine That Could

Given what I am arguing—that fixed liturgy primarily effects *communitas*, prayer primarily effects communion with the Divine, and that the rabbinic liturgical structure commonly provides for both—I am intrigued by the *berakhah* formula: obviously it was quickly adopted, although there is evidence of resistance to a fixed text for it, for example: Rabbi Meir says, “Even if one exclaims only ‘Bountiful is the one who created this amazing bread’ before eating the bread, this qualifies as a *berakhah*. . . .” Rabbi Yosi responds, “Anyone who changes the *berakhah* formula fixed by the wise ones has not fulfilled his/her obligation” (Tosefta Berakhot 4:4–5).²¹ What’s suggested in this passage is a spontaneous, private outburst, expressive of appreciation of the Divine, reminiscent of McGinn’s “lived experience,” but not according to the liturgical script. Of course, the standardized, formulaized language of the *berakhah* formula—and the homogeneity that ensures *communitas*—wins out.

What intrigues me is that the peculiar language of the *berakhah* formula seems to assume that liturgical formulae can also directly effect personal movement toward the Divine.²² The rabbis adopted the nearly unique biblical praise formula that incorporated the second-person, direct address of the Deity, *Barukh atah YHVH* (You are bountiful, YHVH),²³ over the more common biblical expression of praise, *Barukh YHVH* (YHVH is bountiful),²⁴ and they insisted upon the audacious use of the Tetragrammaton.²⁵ Therefore, on the one hand, the very backbone of Jewish liturgy—the

berakhah formula—provides for *communitas* with its fixity and phrasing in first-person plural language (our God, king of the world), yet on the other hand it invites unmediated, personal communion with the Divine via its familiar, second-person direct address.²⁶ Presumably this emphasis upon direct, personal access to the Deity was an ideological reaction against the required mediation of the priesthood, pre- and post-70. However it is also as if this liturgical formula (and the subsequent language of *berakhot* in general) asserts that it can effect both types of spirituality in one fell swoop, thereby defying the taxonomy I proposed at the outset and laying the foundation for the individual to achieve *unio mystica* directly through his or her recitation of the fixed liturgy.

Conclusion

When looking for the spiritual message of a generation one must look to its polemics.²⁷ The liturgical polemics of the rabbinic period centered around the establishment of a fixed text. The focus of the debate was on

1. a uniform, public language of liturgy in preference over more unfixed, idiosyncratic, personal language of prayer;
2. the use of the first-person plural in all liturgical language;
3. and the use of a standardized *berakhah* formula that employs direct, second-person, familiar address of the Deity.

The most immediate spiritual benefit of a public, fixed liturgy is the mystical union of *communitas*, expressed most bluntly in Shmuel's claim that no one may cut themselves off from the community in their worship. On the other hand, we observe in the resistance to the fixed liturgy a desire for a spirituality other than *communitas*, a spirituality of personal *unio mystica* with the Divine. Therefore, the earlier rabbis made space within and around their fixed liturgical framework that allowed for individual, private devotion at the beginning and end of the fixed liturgy. In doing so, they behaved according to general observations about how most public, formal liturgies make room for private prayer in their frameworks.

At the risk of oversimplification, I have posited two fundamental spiritual goals for worship: movement toward one's fellow, and movement

toward the Divine. By superimposing these two models of spirituality onto the polemics around the fixed liturgy in the early rabbinic period, we can recognize how the resulting liturgical framework reflects a desire for these goals and also provides for their simultaneous achievement in the *berakhab* formula, the backbone of Jewish liturgical expression.

NOTES

1. For a basic description of ritual (and liturgy), see Roy Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1979), pp. 175–179. For a response, see Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism* (University of South Carolina, 1990), pp. 13–14; and Catherine Bell, *Ritual* (New York: OUP, 1997), pp. 138–169. The best summary of the discussion can be found in Nathan Mitchell, “Revisiting the Roots of Ritual,” *Liturgy Digest* 1:1 (Spring 1993), pp. 4–36. An excellent guide to effective liturgy, one that balances the academic debates, is by Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).

2. I prefer to translate this latter concept as heartfelt supplications, although the word cannot be translated precisely, and thus I use the Hebrew transliteration herein; cf. Seth Kadish, *Kavvana* (Lanham, MO: Jason Aronson, 1997), pp. 12–16. Cf. Daniel T. Benedict, *Patterned by Grace* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2007), p. 14, on the Latin and Greek terms and their meaning.

3. *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, et. al. (New York: Crossroads, 1985), p. xvi.

4. These two models are essentially those that form the dichotomy critiqued by Richard Gaillardetz, “North American Culture and the Liturgical Life of the Church: The Separation of the Quests for Transcendence and Community,” *Worship* 68:5 (September 1994), pp. 403–416.

5. I have borrowed Tom Driver’s imagery of movement, although I use it differently; *Liberating Rites* (Bellevue, TN: Westview, 1998), p. 154. The roughly Jewish equivalent of *unio mystica* is *d’vekut*, but this term has kabbalistic technical valences that I want to avoid herein. Perhaps a closer equivalent would be Rolland’s “oceanic feeling” wherein the perceived dualisms of self/world, inner/outer, sacred/secular, etc., dissolve, and a simple, dynamic unity is left. See William Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling* (New York: OUP, 1999), p. 70. Mortimer Ostow describes the state of mind as “a loss of *ego boundaries*” and “the sense of a loosening of ties with the immediate material world and of becoming united with the universe and all of its contents—both in time and in space.” He offers a discussion of the “psychodynamics of the mystical experience” in his edited volume, *Ulti-*

mate Intimacy (London: Karnac, 1995), pp. 17–39. Thanks to Menahem Schmelzer who directed me to this book.

6. This focus might be directed toward a simple passage (such as the Jesus prayer of monastic circles; e.g., see John D. Zizioulas, “The Early Christian Community,” in McGinn, pp. 106–107), or the constant repetition of texts such as Psalms, or a visual icon, or the quiet itself, listening attentively (*hesychasm*). Certain varieties of kabbalistic techniques, which are exclusively individual and isolationist, would also apply here; see Elliot Wolfson, “Mystical-Theurgical Dimensions Prayer in *Sefer Ha-Rimmon*,” in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, v. 3, ed. David Blumenthal (Atlanta, GA: Brown, 1988), pp. 40–80; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1988), pp. 97–111, *passim*.

7. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Cornell University, 1977), pp. 94–165; for more recent discussion, see Driver, pp. 153–165.

8. This example locates this first-person plural language in the Jewish world, but Christian theologians, whose liturgies are often in the first-person singular, also write of how one is linked to the community while in private recitation of the liturgy; see Benedict, pp. 27, 31, 94–95, *passim*. Muslim liturgy mixes first-person singular and first-person plural language, but the appointed worship times, heralded by the public call, suggests a like goal of *communitas*.

9. Driver, p. 154.

10. Successful *communitas* can in turn result in a kind of *unio mystica*, wherein there is the possibility of achieving the “oceanic feeling” or enhanced awareness of the Deity: rabbinic literature abounds with examples of where the Divine is said to reside in the presence of a communal gathering (e.g., B. Berakhot 6a). But this would be a secondary benefit, according to Turner’s model, where the mystical communal dynamic is the primary result. Christian theology and mystogogy similarly describe the Holy Spirit being present in liturgical gatherings; e.g., Benedict, pp. 124–125. Cf. Ostow, 36: “. . . membership in a group reinforces the impression that he has achieved that reunion [with the mother].”

11. In order to track spirituality as it relates to liturgy in an earlier period, we are at the mercy of old texts that describe the intent and goals of liturgy or of texts that describe the presumed effects of liturgy: “The spiritual life of monasticism is hidden in the depths of human consciousness; however, its visible manifestations are found in institutions, in social and political conduct . . . and, *most of all, literary works*” (italics added for emphasis); from Jean Gribomont, “Monasticism and Asceticism: Eastern Christianity,” McGinn, p. 89.

12. All translations are my own.

13. See also B. Berakhot 7b (bottom)–8a.

14. See Ezra Fleischer, “On the Beginnings of Obligatory Jewish Prayer,” *Tarbitz* 59:3–4 (1990), especially note 2. For a response to Fleischer and fuller discussion, see Ruth Langer, “Revisiting Early Rabbinic Liturgy,” *Prooftexts* 19:2 (1999), pp. 179–204.

15. See Brad Artson's summary of the scholarly debate on the meaning of *barukh*: "Barukh ha-Shem: God is Bountiful," *Conservative Judaism* 46:2 (Winter 1994), pp. 32–43.

16. See J. Berakhot 4:4.

17. Joseph Heinemann addresses the relationship of these two passages in *Studies in Jewish Liturgy*, ed. Avigdor Shinan (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983), pp. 77–79. What I write here has no fundamental conflict with Heinemann, and his argument is somewhat forced and serves only to buttress his larger argument that there was no fixed liturgical text in the tannaitic period, as he himself betrays in n. 7.

18. Cf. Kadish's discussion of the M passages and related tannaitic and amoraic literature; *Kavvana*, pp. 13–16, 18–30, 258–281.

19. What was being said in the "warm-up period" is never identified, although it is widely assumed to be Psalms, reminding one of the prominence of Psalm recitation among the Christian monastic (and cathedral) communities of the third century, where the goal was continuous, perpetual "prayer," that is, constant focus on the Divine, even while doing mundane activities; see Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, 2d rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 14–91, esp. pp. 14–29, 35, and 67–73; and Kallistos Ware, "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation: Eastern," McGinn, pp. 395–414. In the Jewish context this warm-up develops into the *Pesukei Dezimra*, largely comprising psalmody. Ironically, all these attempts of the early rabbinic leaders and *hasidim ha-rishonim* to spiritually enhance the *Amidah* became codified, standardized into not only the PdZ, but what we know as *Elohai n'tsor* and *Tahanun*.

20. I purposely do not deal herein with kavanah: the concept is not identical with spirituality, although one can conclude that it is the necessary mindset to achieve a spiritual state; see David Blumenthal in Kadish, pp. 562–564; David Halivni, *M'korot u-M'sorot* (New York: JTS, 1978), p. 403, n. 3; Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshufta*, *Mo'ed* (New York: JTS, 1955), 5:1045; Robert Goldenberg, "Commandment and Consciousness in Talmudic Thought," *Harvard Theological Review* 68:3–4 (1975); and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Human Will in Judaism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholar's Press, 1986). When I surveyed the uses of this term in the early rabbinic literature (I focused solely on Yer Pes and Yer Meg), I noted that it seems to mean simply attentiveness to God effected by directing one's worship to God. I noticed that the gemara often introduces the concept of kavanah into its discussion when it is not introduced or dictated by the Mishnaic text. And I conclude that the concept of kavanah was of some import for the amoraim relative to the tannaim; that it was a concept that increased in importance over the generations. I hypothesize that because the gemara is typically concerned with the realities of daily life, more so than the Mishnah, it is deeply interested in the reality of the absence of one's kavanah, and therefore ends up discussing this concept. As a result of my survey, I conclude that there was an amoraic concern with infusing kavanah into all ritual and liturgical acts, and this was necessary precisely because ritual and liturgy

is rote and unchanging (for the most part). Beyond my limited survey, Kadish's book is the fullest treatment of the term that I know.

21. See Lieberman, *TK Z'ra'im*, 1:59–60, for further discussion of variants for the *berakhah* formula.

22. As I ponder this, I keep returning to Max Kadushin's application of his notion of normal mysticism to the *berakhah* formula; see *Worship and Ethics* (Jacksonville, FL: Bloch, 1963), pp. 63–69.

23. The phrase with “atah” occurs only in I Chronicles 29:10 and Psalms 119:12. See J. Berakhot 8:9, 12d: Shmuel and Rav's dispute over the necessity of using “atah.”

24. See a sample list in Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 83 n. 9, and the related discussion, pp. 82–89.

25. E.g., B. Berakhot 40b (middle: Rav's dictate to this effect, and Abaye and Yohanan's proofs); Heinemann, op. cit., p. 89.

26. See J. Berakhot 9:1 for parables that express this theology.

27. Charles Kannengiesser, “The Spiritual Message of the Great Fathers,” McGinn, p. 61.