

How Should a Jew Pray?

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Question: In certain Jewish circles, it is thought that the format of prayer used in conservative temples, which include organ music, mixed choirs and much decorum, is more progressive than the traditional prayer format. Perhaps the prayer service in Orthodox synagogues can also be modernized?

Answer: To answer this question, we must first delve into the idea of prayer in general as Judaism understands it. Once we clearly understand the idea of prayer, the answer to this question will perhaps become self-explanatory.

What does the Halacha consider under the heading of prayer? Jewish prayer is not some form of ceremonial worship as it is in the catholic churches and in some protestant churches. Every ceremony consists of at least 3 characteristic aspects:

- 1) The ceremonial activity emphasizes the externalities of the ceremony. The feeling is not important, rather the expression, the medium. The intent has no importance only the prose. The inner consciousness of man is worthless, only the superficial externality. In brief, a ceremonial act relies on the duplicity of "אחד בפה ואחד בלב".
- 2) A ceremonial act always strives to separate the person from reality and instead to lead him to an illusory world. In practical everyday life there are no ceremonial acts. Life is simple, grey, and monotonous; one who wishes to glorify the beauty of a ceremonial act must climb into a different realm, a realm of pseudo-reality.
- 3) A ceremony requires a master of the ceremony who is charged with conducting it in an impressive way. The regular individual can only be a spectator, he cannot be an active participant in it.

The essence of Tefila excludes these 3 aspects of ceremony. What is the essence of prayer according to Halacha? The religious act of prayer is Halachically unique

and fundamentally different from many Torah commandments. The uniqueness of Tefila consists in that its essence and content do not lie in the superficial, physical appearance of the individual who is praying, or in the recitation of a specific text, or specific body positions and acts such as standing or bending forward, but rather in the subjective sphere, in a mood, a feeling, in a religious experience. Tefila requires intention, Kavana. This Kavana is not a simple reflection of the religious approach, as with other commandments. Rather it is the central motif and content of Tefila itself. In brief, Tefila, as the Halacha has called it, is a worship of God with, or through, the heart, עבודה שבלב.

In truth, the Halacha never placed much stock in the subjective, formless and flowing mood that comes from the individual and his experiences. It always demanded that the mighty wave of feeling and thought should flow into objective tools and should be realized through specific concrete actions: the feeling of kindness that comes from giving charity (חסד וצדקה). The feeling of sanctity in acting morally etc. Subjectivity and internal perspective alone are like a soul without a body. It is valueless, worthless ephemeral, minute. The inner feeling shines beautifully, like a beautiful rising sun on a clear summer morning, that is quickly lost and clouded in the fog of uncertainty. The physical action gives the subjective standpoint a stability and legacy/continuity. Therefore, the Halacha required that prayer, עבודה שבלב, would not remain locked away and hidden in the heart, but rather should radiate outward and achieve its goal, Tikkun, through a rigidly structured prayer text, נוסח התפלה.

We pray 3 times a day and perform other objective acts of worship, however all these requirements touch only the technique of prayer, (in Halachic terms, the Mitzvah act, מעשה המצוה). These prayers are the media through which prayer manifests the עבודה שבלב but not the basic kernel or essence of prayer, which remains hidden in the depths of the inner recesses of the heart, in the mysterious shudder of a soul thirsting for God. If I were to use a Halachic term, I would say that the fulfillment of the Mitzvah, קיום המצוה, is accomplished via the heart, קיום בלב, "אל תעש תפלתך קבע אלא רחמים ותחנונים לפני המקום", בלב.

The conclusion of this point is simple: even though it appears that the structured text of prayer, נוסח התפלה, is the same for all. the prayer itself is not standardized. All of us recite the same words. All of us bow down when we recite Modim, all of us pray facing Eretz Yisrael, all of us include משיב הרוח in the winter and יעלה ויבא at the new moon, yet every heart worships God in its own individual and unique way. Already at the start of the Shmoneh Esray, when we proclaim that God is האל הגדול הגבור והנורא, each individual says the words through the prism of his own unique experiences. Through this, one can feel the infinite power of God, how He reveals himself through the mathematical/physical world, to appreciate the great astronomical distances that spread out before man on a clear cloudless night. The dynamic of nature displaying the boundaries of the universe speak to the philosophically inclined individual of the greatness of God, all of which can be experienced through the same Shmoneh Esray: "כי אראה שמיד מעשי אצבעותיך ירח וכוכבים אשר כוננת (תהלים ח:ד).

A different person, who appreciates esthetic beauty feels the breath of the Infinite One, האל הגדול הגבור והנורא, in the beauty and artistic richness of nature, in the beauty of the oceans, in the sunrises and sunsets, in the interplay between sunlight and shadows. "ד' אלקי גדלת מאוד הוד והדר לבשת עוטה אור כשלמה (תהלים קד:א-ב).

An ethical/moral personality finds God in the spiritual world order, through the human yearning for good, for a moral consciousness etc. The mystical religious soul confronts God through its own yearnings for Him, in the drive to discover infinity and perpetuity, in its love for the divine presence, the שכינה, and its constant searching for God. "על משכבי בלילה בקשתי את שאהבה נפשי".

The simple man encounters האל הגדול הגבור והנורא in his small everyday life, in his limited daily needs such as a livelihood, a good career for his children etc.

Yes, all of us pray, all of us recite the same Shmoneh Esray. The technical religious act is the same, however the עבודה שבלב of each is different and unique. Each person's prayer is an individual, unique experience which does not permit itself to be compressed into the general measure of conventional religiosity. It is

like the spiritual/religious personality itself, alone and lonely. It cannot flow together with the prayer of the congregation.

If the well-established text of prayer is no more than a medium for expressing the individual, heartfelt עבודה שבלב, we must always be careful that the medium into which we pour our remarkable feelings and thoughts should not inhibit completely our innermost prayers. The body with its layers of clothing should not suffocate the soul and the format should not suppress the life of the intent of the prayer. That is why Judaism was so careful to protect prayer, that it should not break under the weight of esthetics that people from time to time seek to impose on it. An emphasis on song, organ music, mixed choirs and other decorative mementos undermine the foundations of עבודה שבלב. It is true that Judaism always desires the religious act be conducted in a nice format, "זה קלי ואנוהו (שמות טו:ב)". However, Judaism was also always careful with all commandments, and especially by prayer, that a beautiful technical performance of the Mitzvah should not suffocate or overtake the spiritual hope and the mouth should not displace the heart.

Let us not forget that even though religious feeling shares much in common with the appreciation of beauty in performing the act - both seek that which is elevated, mysterious and unreachable - there is a fundamental gap between them. One who seeks beauty alone finds satisfaction in the harmonious form, in the collection of art, music, prose and lyrics. Formal unity and continuity are the main goals of esthetic development. It follows then, that the form is primary while the substance is secondary.

The beauty of the religious experience stands in contrast to my previous statement. It can only be found in the excess of substance over form, in the irregularity or differences of expression, in the inner storm that shatters all forms and categories of external beauty. One who thirsts for God is very distant from being satisfied with himself on a simple level. Such a personality is conflicted and torn. It undergoes many reincarnations. It jumps from one situation to another, from the heights of ecstasy to the depths of despair, from spiritual peace to wild fear and unrest. At times it sings with great fervor "ד' רועי לא אחסר בנאות דשא ירביצני על מי מנוחות ינהלני". At times it shrieks "אנא אלך מרוחק ואנא מפניך אברה". It is filled with

emotional capriciousness and meanders in a zig zag. Therefore, it cannot fit in the strict formal categories of artistic expression or include itself among the categories of external effects.

Were prayer to consist only of an external, superficial act, perhaps we could have incorporated it into a musical composition, insisted on a rigorous formal decorum of dress, in the music of the organ, in the rhetoric of the rabbi, in singing of עלינו in a church-like celebratory tone and in synchronized bowing at the words of ואנחנו כורעים ומשתחוים. However, “unfortunately” Judaism views prayer as a worship of the heart, עבודה שבלב. A worship of a heart that beats quickly and cannot be regulated, a heart that is filled with yearning and love for God, a heart that seeks, thirsts, and yearns for God. A heart filled with dissonance, a heart so crazed, wild and primitive that it fears stepping over the threshold of the temple [Note: non-orthodox synagogue], for in the temple all is normal, civilized and logical.

The amazing Jewish heart prayed this way since the time of our patriarch Abraham. That is why Jewish music associated with specific prayers is very far from musical perfection. The Jewish melodic format distinguished itself many times in its lack of formality and with its sudden twists and turns. He who seeks harmonious organization in the music associated with Jewish prayer will be disappointed. What we can find here is the emotional outcry of feeling, for example, hope and vision in ובכן תן פחדך, quiet joy and yearning when we recite אָנָּה הָשֵׁם חַטָּאוּ or אֲשַׁמְנוּ, resignation and sadness when we recite הכהנים והעם, simultaneous melancholy and anticipation in the קדיש we recite before בעילה, celebration and exhilaration in the recitation of כל נדרי. From all these melodies we do not see an abundance of music, but rather a wealth of heartfelt feeling and the revelation of one's soul. The mood associated with מן המצר קראתי ד', from תפלה לעני, כי יעטף ולפני ד' ישפך שיחו, this is the melodious sounds associated with worship of the heart, where the form is submerged within the substance. When it comes to the question of external versus internal feelings in prayer, the heart, the truth, is in control.

I imagine to myself Kol Nidrei night in the shul of the Baal Shem Tov or the Baal HaTanya (first Lubavitcher Rebbe). These synagogues definitely did not employ

music, choirs or decorum. There were no fancy altars with fancy carpets, flowers or rabbis schooled in the finest diction and manners. In those shuls, simple, plain Jews prayed, Jews who were very distant from *יפיתו של יפת*, the fancy decorum that is imitated from non-Jewish houses of worship. However, they did have a religious fire and shudder that linked and blended them together with previous generations. “עזה כמות אהבה קשה כשאל קנאה... (שיר השירים ח:ו)”. The form was completely omitted and lacking. However, this facilitated a storm of fiery belief and faith, of a great love and devotion to the Creator of the universe. Presumably all those who prayed in those shuls were swaying in unison, like the trees in the forest when a strong sustained wind blows through. They assuredly shook out from the inner recesses of their very being the service of the heart, *עבודה שבלב*.

I have the right to picture such a scene. For in my youthful memories, memories that are both half foggy and half romanticized, I can still see now how a Chabad congregation would shake and sway during prayer the first night of Rosh Hashanah. This was the Coronation Night, *ליל ההכתרה*, as older Chasidim would refer to it, when the insignificant, helpless, non-entity human being that is here today and gone tomorrow, extends the crown to the King of Kings, the Eternal One, and refers to Him as *המלך הקדוש*, the Holy King. I can still hear the murmuring of hundreds of inspired and motivated Jews that would flow through the synagogue when the Chazan would conclude the Kaddish and the congregation would start the silent Amidah, an anticipation of something great and uplifted, warm and alive that required no cantor, choir, no theatrical decorations to reach the gates of heaven.

Does the geyser that bursts forth from the ground require artistic assistance to demonstrate its beauty and impress all who behold it? Does the burning lava that flows from the erupting volcano have to follow the simple rules of a cold decorum? Rather, it is their natural eruption and spontaneity that reflect their beauty, the *הוד שבגבורה*! Is not the person who prays, a bursting geyser or a fiery volcano?

It should therefore be obvious that prayer is the antithesis of a ceremonial act when it comes to substance over form, between heart and word. Therefore, all these

esthetic “improvements”, instead of deepening the religious experience, rob its content and soul.

However, the other two characteristics of the ceremonial appear as שעטנז in relation to עבודה שבלב. If authentic prayer takes place in the heart, it does not require any master of ceremonies who acts as an intermediary between the congregation and the Creator of the universe. Every individual has a heart that, according to Judaic outlook, is filled with love, conscious or subconscious, towards God. And the heart of each Jew is as close to God as the heart of the rabbi, and often perhaps even closer. The rabbi does not need to stand at the altar (Bima), dressed in his “priestly vestments” and need not “conduct the service”. The plain and simple Jews in the congregation are as near and privileged vis a vis God as the rabbi who stands on an elevated stage above the rest of the congregants. All must stand and pray at the same level of the shul [Note: in a synagogue where the rabbi’s seat is on a higher level than the congregation, the rabbi should descend from his elevated place] without any difference. I do not wish to discuss here the Halachic issues regarding the prohibition against praying from an elevated platform. However, I want to emphasize one thing: standing on a platform, above the congregation while the congregation is reciting prayers is a contradiction to עבודה שבלב, which is an expression of the idea of calling to God from the depths, ממעמקים קראתיך ד'. The false role played by the rabbi today in conducting services is a result of the false, misleading ceremonial notion that has infiltrated our approach to prayer.

Above all else, עבודה שבלב cannot be separated from our lives. When one stands before God in prayer, he must give an accounting of his actions beyond the threshold of the synagogue. Prayer must be the mirror that reflects how one conducts his life. It should never be used as a crutch through which man escapes his moral and ethical responsibilities. Jewish synagogues, in contrast to the church, have never developed architectural modes and motifs intended to sober the praying individual and to imbue him with a supernatural mood. The synagogue was never intended to create the illusion that one is standing before God at a time when he is not searching for Him, when his heart is cold and hard as stone, brutal and cynical. Our synagogues never used reduced twilight-like lighting; the white light of the sun has never been distorted by small, stained-glass windows. The echo of the organ, the rich shrill voice of the tenor, or the voices of a mixed choir hidden from

the congregation's view have never reverberated through our synagogues in order to create a supernatural mystical mood. We have never attempted to remove the Jew from reality and fill him with spiritual nonsense. The opposite is true: we have always demanded from him that his prayer should be an extension of his life and be ready to admit the truth before God in his prayer. The entire Christian/catholic dramatization of prayer is so foreign and incomprehensible to our religious understanding and consciousness. Therefore, the Halacha is so adamant in its stand against the so-called modernization of our סדר התפילה, which seeks to distort and obliterate that which is unique, original, and individualistic in our עבודה שבלב.

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