CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

VOLUME 60 NUMBER 3 SPRING 2008

A Publication of the Rabbinical Assembly
Jeffrey Wohlberg, President

and the Jewish Theological Seminary
Arnold Eisen, Chancellor

Published quarterly in the fall, winter, spring, and summer.
Postmaster: Send change of address to CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM,
3080 Broadway, New York, NY 10027.

ISSN 0010-6542 LC 73-642801

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"Angels in the Outhouse": New Perspectives On *Birkat Asher Yatzar**

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Praised are you, YHVH our God,
Ruler of the universe;

(You are the One)
Who formed the human being with wisdom,
And Who created within him/By creating within him
Openings upon openings,
Hollow organs upon hollow organs.

It is revealed and known
Before the throne of Your glory
That should one of these be opened
(When it should be closed),
Or should one of these be closed
(When it should be opened),
It would be impossible to survive
And to stand before You.

Praised are You, YHVH,
Healer of all flesh
And wondrous Creator (of the human being).

(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, 60b)

This paper is an abbreviated version of a much longer treatment of Asher Yatzar that I am happy to share with the reader. My deepest thanks to Professors Eitan Fishbane, David Gordis, Judith Hauptman, Hayim Lapin, Timothy Lytton and Saul Wachs for their guidance and insights during its writing. All translations in this paper are mine, except where otherwise noted.

Asher Yatzar is one of the most profound and popular liturgical expressions of praise for the wisdom of God's creation, specifically our bodies and the functions of digestion and excretion. It receives much theological commentary and attention, particularly in halakhic literature. Recorded in B. Berakhot 60b as the *berakhah* to be recited after relieving oneself, it entered the morning liturgy along with *Birkot Hashahar* during the geonic period to insure that they would be recited by the *baal tefillah* on behalf of all worshippers, especially those whose prayer skills are deficient.[1] A number of the *rishonim,* traditional *Siddur* commentators and codes lavish attention upon the theological message of the *berakhah* as well as its philology.[2] They focus on the meaning of *Asher Yatzar* based upon its wording and internal structure. They highlight it as a praise of God for the body, its functions and its capacity for self-healing and correction, all of which are part of the miracle of creation. Their interpretations also recognize the ancient rabbinic idea that God's creative wisdom is made manifest in the ways that the body—a physical container—manages to hold the human soul (referred to as air in these sources) without letting it out.

However, the traditional commentators do not acknowledge that *Asher Yatzar* is also an "address" to God about the mystery of the physical and spiritual dimensions of being human that we experience through our bodies' functions and malfunctions, as well as through mortality. A close reading of *Asher Yatzar* in its literary context reveals that this *berakhah* is the Talmud's meditation on the temporary loss and restoration of our full human dignity each time we perform these bodily functions and, by extension, each time our bodies malfunction and heal. The Talmud expresses this tension between our physical and spiritual selves in terms of leaving one's accompanying angels "at the door of the throne room" (i.e., the bathroom) only to return with them to stand before God's throne as a fully restored, "angelic" human being.

My interest in analyzing *Asher Yatzar* is partly academic: I wish to examine new ways in which it can be read and understood by rabbis, scholars, and laypeople using some of the tools at our disposal for close reading of biblical and rabbinic texts. Equally important is my interest in its deeper spiritual meaning and pastoral value: I present new ways in which *Asher Yatzar* can be taught and prayed as a daily-recited *berakhah* that connects us to God through our bodies, and as a tool for the spiritual care of people who are sick or in crisis.

The Biblical and Talmudic Context of the *Berakhah*

My interpretation of the *berakhah* is influenced by the methodology employed by Professor Judith Hauptman for close, contextual readings of Talmudic literature. Her textual analyses of how the rabbis of the Talmud approached and developed the halakhic status of women in the setting of ancient rabbinic patriarchy can also be used to understand this *berakhah* in its Talmudic setting.[3] Following Professor Hauptman's methodology, I will show how I believe *Asher Yatzar* can be understood using three different readings of the *berakhah*. I will look at its references to the creation of humanity that echo earlier biblical sources and commentators on those sources. I will also examine how the meaning of a critical phrase in *Asher Yatzar* is clarified through its parallel use in one other passage of rabbinic literature. Most importantly, I will examine the *berakhah* as part of the *sugya* found in B. Berakhot, 60a–b.

1. The Biblical Evidence: Ezekiel 28:12b–13 and *Targum Yonatan*

The interpretive translation of Ezekiel 28:12b-13 found in *Targum Yonatan* is often cited by *Siddur* commentators as the literary source of *Asher Yatzar*.[4] *Ezekiel* 28:11–19 contains a lamentation over the Prince of Tyre. The prophet harshly criticizes him for falling from his divinely-favored status because of his arrogance in regarding himself as a god. In *Ezekiel* 28:12b–13, God recalls the prince's primordial status of grandeur bestowed upon him by God in Eden:[5]

> You were the seal of perfection,
> full of wisdom (*hokhmah*) and flawless in beauty.
> You were in Eden, the garden of God;
> Every precious stone was your adornment:
> carnelian, chrysolite, and amethyst;
> beryl, lapis lazuli and jasper;
> sapphire, turquoise and emerald;
> and gold beautifully wrought for you,
> mined for you,
> prepared the day you were created.

This is the Jewish Publication Society's 1999 translation based upon the

translation team's admitted uncertainty concerning the meaning of the Hebrew, specifically the phrase *m'lekhet tupekha u-n'kavekha bakh b'yom hi-ba-raakha konanu.*[6] RaDaK, Rashi, and *Metzudat David* render *tupekha u-n'kavekha* as "your (hollow) drums and (hollow-tubed) musical instruments." Following them, the entire phrase could be translated as "your crafted (hollow) drums and (hollow-tubed) instruments were upon you; they were prepared the day you were created." Since this translation does not follow the main theme of the rest of the verse—the precious stones of the High Priest's breastplate with which the Prince of Tyre was adorned in "priestly" or "Eden-like" fashion—it is not surprising that it was not adopted by JPS as the accepted translation. The *New Interpreter's Bible* understands the phrase as "settings and mountings" or "settings and engravings," recognizing that the words of the phrase are obscure, and are possibly "from the world of jewelry making."[7] Nonetheless, this interpretation of *tupekha u-n'kavekha* as hollow-tubed objects or instruments is actually quite ancient. *Targum Yonatan,* the Aramaic translation of Prophets which is found in standard rabbinic Bibles, is traditionally ascribed to Yonatan ben Uzziel, Hillel the Elder's student who flourished in the Land of Israel in the first centuries BCE and CE.[8] The translation is not a straight rendering of the text from Hebrew into Aramaic, but often a midrashic interpretation. Note how Yonatan translates the above verses, particularly the words for hollow-tubed objects and instruments:

> You were like a well-formed object, prepared with wisdom and decorous in its beauty. You were pampered with an abundance of good things and delicacies as if you dwelled in Eden, the garden of God. All kinds of opulent and honorable wealth were given to you, all sorts of precious stones arranged on your clothing. . . . Then your heart became haughty. But surely, you did not look at your lifeless body that is made of *hollow organs and openings.* They are your bowels (lit. "your necessities") without which it would be impossible for you to survive.[9] They were prepared as a part of you from the day that you were created.

Yonatan transforms these technical terms for jewelry engravings and settings into descriptions of the body's hollow tubes and organs. Specific phrases in his translation are also found in *Asher Yatzar,* especially words and phrases

such as *hokhmah*/wisdom, *hallalin u-n'kavin*/hollow organs and openings, and *d'lo efshar lakh d'titkayem*/it would be impossible for you to survive. Certainly, he is addressing the arrogant subject of Ezekiel's prophecy, Tyre's royalty. Yet by extension he is addressing all human beings whose unbridled, "god-like" power and arrogance cause them to forget the mortal, physical frame which God fashioned for us in Eden, and without which we cannot function. Yonatan purposely chooses that part of the body involving digestion and excretion as a highly graphic reminder of the lowliness and mortality that we, God's (often overly proud) creations, share with other species. At the same time, he follows the plain sense of the verses by also emphasizing the beauty and wisdom with which human beings were created. A limited reading of *Targum Yonatan* would insist that this early rabbinic translator was referring only to Tyrian royalty and not to human beings in general. However, that is certainly not how his translation is used in *Asher Yatzar*.

What seems clear is that the *Targum* uses Ezekiel 28:13 to address the dual nature of being human that has been our legacy since God created us in Eden at the beginning of time. We are "animal and angel": on the one hand mortal and earthy, on the other hand beautifully designed with divine wisdom as the highest of God's creations. I am not asserting a strict, literal similarity between humans and angels in these biblical and rabbinic passages. Nonetheless, this "angelic" dimension is well attested by their emphases on the wisdom and sense of beauty used by God in forming human beings, which surpass those of all other species. Of additional importance is their use of the verb *bara*, "form out of nothing," that echoes the emphatic description in Genesis 1:27 of the unique creation of human beings in God's image. *Asher Yatzar* shares with the *Targum* this dual vision of the human condition. It praises God explicitly for the magnificent wisdom with which God created human beings, our bodies in particular. It also implicitly recognizes that this wonderfully wise creation is like all other animal bodies: it has to do lowly things like rid itself of waste, it is subject to dysfunction and it can die.[10]

2. The Biblical Evidence: Genesis

In *Asher Yatzar*, the words *yatzar* and *bara*, "formed" and "created," echo both Genesis narratives concerning the creation of human beings. God

declares that God will personally make human beings, "earth persons," from the land, just as with the other land animals (*na'aseh adam*, 1:24–26). However, because human beings are created in God's image and after God's likeness, they are more than a derivative of the earth (*adam/ah*) like the other land creatures. They are an entirely new creation "out of nothing." The Bible emphasizes this idea by using the verb *bara*, "create from nothing," three times in 1:27, the verse about the creation of human beings (*va-yivra, bara, bara*). Genesis 2 introduces the word *yatzar*, "formed from something," to describe how God created human beings, instead of continuing to use *asah* or *va-yaas*, "personally made something." As has been demonstrated, this second Creation narrative emphasizes humankind's earthly, rather than spiritual, origins.[11] The first man is formed (*va-yitzer*, 2:7), from the dust of the earth, and God personally blows the breath of life into him. God then forms all of the other animals from the earth as well (*va-yitser*, 2:19) and brings them to the man to name them. Even though naming the other animals gives the man power over them, his origin—the earth—is no different from theirs.

Asher Yatzar appears to erase the early biblical distinctions between *bara*, creation of human beings in the divine image as a new entity, and *yatzar*, creation of the human body from the earth. *Bara*, "created from nothing," modifies *n'kavim* and *hallulim*, the openings and hollow organs of the body, rather than emphasizing humanity as the divine reflection.[12] I suggest that, while the author of the *berakhah* may have used the two terms for creation indiscriminately, it is also possible that the author used them here in two meaningfully distinctive ways. At the very least, we could assert that the use of the word *bara*, echoing the narrative in Genesis 1, would not be unfamiliar to a person who knows the Hebrew text about humanity being created uniquely in God's image. So too, the Hebrew-speaking worshipper would be familiar with the use of *yatzar* in Genesis 2 that emphasizes the earthly origins we share with other species. By using *yatzar* and *bara*, the *berakhah* asks the worshipper to consciously affirm that the body and all of its functions, including excretion, reflect our dual physical and spiritual selves. We are physical, embodied creatures formed by the Creator, and we do things that make us no different from other animal species. Yet our intricate system of openings and hollow organs is actually another aspect of what makes us reflections of divine wisdom, along with the breath of life breathed into us by God at the beginning of creation.[13]

3. Openings Upon Openings, Hollow Organs Upon Hollow Organs

N'kavim, n'kavim, hallulim, hallulim is used in two different contexts in the Babylonian Talmud, one of which bemoans the decrepit, mortal state of the body and the other of which celebrates the body as God's creation. The first is found earlier in B. Berakhot 24b:[14]

> If one is reciting the *Amidah* and he passes wind, he waits until its odor ceases, then he goes back to praying.

There are those who say [this teaching in the following version]:

> If one is reciting the *Amidah* and he wishes to pass wind, he steps backwards a distance of four cubits, he passes wind, he waits until its odor ceases, then he goes back to praying. [Before praying again] he says: "Master of the universe, *You formed us with openings upon openings, hollow organs upon hollow organs. Revealed and known before You* are our shame and our disgrace when we are alive, and that our end is [nothing but] maggots and worms." He then continues the *Amidah* from the place where he had stopped.

The phrase italicized above closely parallels that of *Asher Yatzar*: "... *And Who created within him openings upon openings, hollow organs upon hollow organs.*[15] *It is revealed and known before the throne of Your glory* ..." However, the prayer in B. Berakhot 24b is the individual's "reminder" to God of the weakness of the human body that causes us to interrupt prayer to perform disgraceful physical acts. We are full of God-given openings and organs that make these things happen. Even the dignity of prayer is not enough to overcome the corruptions of our bodies that God has created. Though it shares with Berakhot 24b an acknowledgement of human physical frailty and mortality, Berakhot 60b (the locus of *Asher Yatzar*) views people and their bodies in a very different way: we, our openings and organs, are reflections of divine wisdom, not sources of shame and disgrace.

I suggest that, at the very least, the above phrase may have been understood in both ways as a common figure of speech in Amoraic Palestine and

Babylonia. Both uses of the phrase can be heard in *Asher Yatzar* in a highly nuanced fashion. Having performed bodily functions, the worshipper stands before God in thanks for the body given to him or her. Its capacity to function and to regulate itself distinguishes it as an unparalleled example of divine wisdom and human magnificence. At the same time, its similarity to the mortal bodies of other animal species is a sober reminder that "Man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing ..."[16] This second idea is reinforced by the *berakhah* when it reminds us that, its divine source notwithstanding, the wondrous system of human organs and openings is subject to potential breakdown like that of any other animal. The worshipper is asked to recite the words *n'kavim n'kavim hallulim hallulim* with a full consciousness of the dual nature of human existence that is located in the marvelous and mortal systems of our bodies.

4. *Baraitot* about Entering and Exiting

Asher Yatzar is embedded in a series of *baraitot* that follow the pattern of M. Berakhot 9:4 and elucidate it.[17]

> Upon entering a [walled, fortified] city one recites two prayers, one when he enters and one when he leaves. Ben Azzai says that he recites four prayers, two when he enters and two when he leaves. [In these prayers] one thanks God for [deliverance in] the past and cries out to God for [deliverance in] the future. (M. Berakhot 9:4) ...
>
> [Elucidating the Mishnah], our Rabbis taught: When one is about to enter a [walled, fortified] city what prayer does he recite? "May it be Your will, My God, to bring me into this city in peace." When he enters the city he says, "I thank You God for bringing me into this city in peace." When he wishes to leave he says, "May it be Your will, My God and God of my ancestors, to bring me out of this city in peace." After he leaves he says, "I thank You, Lord my God, for bringing me out of this city in peace ..."

The Talmud then qualifies the circumstances under which these prayers for entering the city are to be recited with two traditions ascribed to R. Matana:

> Our rabbis taught: When one enters a bath house he recites: "May it be Your will, Lord my God, that you save me from this place and places like it. [In this place], may I not experience any kind of disgrace or sin. If I do experience any kind of disgrace or sin, may my death be atonement for all my sins."[18]

The Talmud then discusses the impropriety of the prayer about disgrace and sin. It adds to the *baraita* an Amoraic prayer of thanks upon leaving the bath house:

> When one leaves the bath house, what prayer does one say?
> Rav Aha says: "I thank You, God, for saving me from the fire."

As part of the longer conversation about conduct and prayer in the bath house, the Talmud then quotes another Amoraic teaching of Rav Aha that is disputed:

> Rav Aha says: When one enters [a physician's office] to have a bloodletting, he recites: "May it be Your will, Lord my God, that this shall be a healing endeavor for me, and that You will heal me, for You are a faithful healer and Your healing is truthful. For [the truth is that] it is not natural for human beings to engage in healing, even though this has become human custom . . ."

Abaye then rejects Rav Aha's contention by quoting Rabbi Yishmael's teaching that God grants the physician permission to heal:

> When one gets up [from the physician's table] what does one say?
>
> Rav Aha says: "Praised is the One Who heals for free."
>
> When one enters the bathroom [literally, "the throne room"], he recites, "Be honored, honored ones, celestial servants. Show honor to the God of Israel. Leave me alone while I enter here, do what I desire, then return to you."
>
> Abaye says: A person should not recite this prayer this way, for perhaps they [the ministering angels accompanying him] will leave him there and abandon him. Rather he should say, "Guard me, guard me. Help me, help me. Support me, support me. Wait for me, wait for me until I enter here and return, for this is the nature of human beings."
>
> When a person leaves the bathroom he recites, "Praised [are You YHVH our God, Ruler of the universe] who formed the human being with wisdom, and Who created within/by creating within him openings upon openings, hollow organs upon hollow organs. It is revealed and known before the throne of Your glory that should one of these be opened [when it should be closed], or should one of these be closed [when it should be opened], it would be impossible to stand before You."

A discussion of versions of the ending of the *berakhah* follows:

> When one enters his bed to sleep, he recites the first and second paragraphs of the Shema, then he recites the following:
>
> [A long *berakhah* follows, asking God to cause the worshipper to lie down in peace, protected from the evil inclination, bad dreams, illness, and death. The Talmud then records the *berakhah, Elohai Neshama,* which the worshipper recites upon awakening.] (B. Berakhot 60a–60b)

These passages are a collection of *baraitot* and Amoraic teachings about prayers for entering and exiting different places safely. They address human anxiety about what Professor Neil Gillman calls threshold experiences: instances in which one's transition from one place or state of being (he uses the word structure) to another is fraught with a sense of chaos.[19] Each of the prayers mentioned in these passages can be seen as a ritualized way in which the individual in transition from one physical state or place to another re-creates a sense of personal order and structure that is rooted in the larger cosmic order created by God. They are arranged purposefully to move the reader and the worshipper inward from threshold experiences involving external, physical danger to those of internal (or internalized) danger which is physical and moral in nature.[20] This arrangement is perhaps employed to emphasize the necessity of praying to God for protection regardless of the nature or location of one's journeys in life.

The statements to the angels prior to entering the bathroom and the recitation of *Asher Yatzar* after exiting it do not fit exactly the pattern of

the *sugya*. A close inspection of them and their relationship to *Asher Yatzar* reveals that the Talmud's anxiety about this specific threshold experience is unique among these passages. Rather than be concerned with the physical and moral dangers (i.e., the dangers of sinning) that await the one who enters, the Talmud focuses on the physical and "spiritual" or existential dangers. Note again both passages found in the *sugya:*

> Be honored, honored ones, celestial servants. Show honor to the God of Israel. Leave me alone while I enter here, do what I desire, then return to you.
>
> Guard me, guard me. Help me, help me. Support me, support me. Wait for me, wait for me until I enter here and return, for this is the nature of human beings.

In both versions the worshipper calls upon the two angels that, according to tradition, accompany a person during his or her lifetime.[21] The individual admonishes them to remain outside until he or she does what is desired, *for this is the nature of human beings*. The bathroom is not a proper place for our accompanying angels because it exposes our nakedness and our performance of the bodily functions that make us most like other animals. This can "shock" the angels, dishonor God, and embarrass the human being involved, who is now revealed to be less "angelic" than he or she appeared. These "entrance prayers" are entreaties to one's attendant angels not to abandon him or her as they await him or her outside that coarse place where he or she performs these functions. We would expect these statements of the individual outside the bathroom to focus explicitly on the physical dangers—especially from demons, scorpions, and snakes—awaiting one who enters that place.[22] Instead, what the individual recites is a request for privacy and a disclaimer about the diminished "angelic" profile of human beings in this physical circumstance. The human being entering the bathroom is in danger of losing the distinctively spiritual dimension of his humanity, because he or she is about to do something that marks him or her as yet another mortal creation. Further, as a *berakhah* to be recited upon exiting a place of danger, *Asher Yatzar* is altogether different from the other exit-prayers in the *sugya,* which focus on thanking God for saving us from a specific danger, physical or moral. *Asher Yatzar,* by contrast, focuses first on praising God for creating us wisely by making our bodies' functions wise. I am not arguing that these passages are not concerned with our entering and exiting a place in which potentially dangerous bodily activity occurs; they are. However, they are also concerned with the close identification of humans with angels that is in danger of being erased should the angels view us behaving, of necessity, like animals.

5. Leaving the "Throne Room" to Stand Before God's Throne

Asher Yatzar is intended as a *berakhah* which is recited *after* performing one's bodily functions in response to what the worshipper had said *before* entering the bathroom. The Talmud uses the standard phrase *beit hakisei,* literally "the chair/throne room," to refer to the bathroom. The phrase seems to establish a connection with the phrase *galui v'yadua lifnei khisei kh'vodekha* that comes later in the *sugya* as part of the text of *Asher Yatzar.* This relatively rare phrase, "it is revealed and known before the throne of Your glory," occurs six times in early halakhic and aggadic literature (excluding all later mentions of the phrase in detailed commentaries on the *berakhah* itself).[23] The earliest references to the throne of divine glory are found in the Bible, particularly among prophets who experience theophanies of God sitting in judgment with celestial attendants at God's side.[24] The rich literature of *Merkavah* and *Heikhalot* mysticism, one of whose major contemplative foci was beholding the divine throne, emerged in part from esoteric interpretive lore concerning Ezekiel 1, and reached its most detailed expression in the first few centuries of the Common Era.[25] There is ample evidence of Rabbis in the Tannaitic period engaging in *Merkavah* and *Heikhalot* mystical practice, as well as warning practitioners of its dangers.[26] References to the throne of glory abound in Talmudic and aggadic literature.[27]

Recognizing the risk of too much generalization, I suggest that—among other things—the throne of divine glory in rabbinic literature is the central celestial site of divine sovereignty, knowledge and forgiveness to which anyone can turn in petition to be saved from death as Moses and the High Priests once did. It is there that a person can move God the supreme ruler to shun punishing anger and to act mercifully by sustaining the life of the petitioner, the people of Israel, and the world. At the throne of glory,

human beings argue like angels, with angels and God alike, for the sake of humanity, which is physically fragile and conscious of its mortality. This function of the divine throne is clarified by an examination of two of the five other uses of *galui v'yadua lifnei khisei kh'vodekha,* the opening phrase used by each petitioner to appeal to God's mercy and kindness. According to one midrash, when God ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he should have reminded God that earlier God had promised him posterity through his son. For his obedience to God's command (thus risking Isaac's life) he asks that when his descendants sin, God should recall the binding of Isaac and forgive them. Mordeḥai argues that he refused to bow down to Haman solely out of fear of God. For his faithfulness to God (thus risking the lives of himself and his fellow Jews), he asks that God deliver them from Haman's murderous plot. In light of these two passages, I suggest that *Asher Yatzar* uses the above phrase for similar purposes: to "speak" with God about confronting the mystery of death and surviving it. Upon fulfilling bodily needs which he or she shares with all animals, the worshipper returns to his or her accompanying angels and restores his or her status as a full human being by doing what the other animal species cannot do: recognizing that the body's normal, healthy functions cannot be taken for granted and that any change in their function might cause disease and death. Having once again left that place of potential physical danger and spiritual diminishment, the worshipper engages in the uniquely human act of standing before God's throne and the angelic assembly in order to assert the following: "I cannot take for granted that my body will always work and that disease and disorder will not kill me. I acknowledge that You have created within me systems whose functioning and capacity for self-healing reflect Your wisdom, yet which simultaneously run the risk of malfunction and death. I ask You, God, for mercy in maintaining the health and balance of my body." Similar to the phrase *n'kavim . . . hallulim* analyzed above, the phrase *galui v'yadua . . .* once again asks the worshipper to see himself or herself standing on the boundary between his or her physical and spiritual "selves." In most respects he or she is no different from other mortal creatures. However, in at least one important respect he or she is distinguished from all other species: he or she can "talk" with God and the angels about the majesty and frailty of his or her body and life.[28]

Restoring the Angels to Asher Yatzar: Pastoral and Spiritual Care Implications

Why do we no longer recite the warnings to the angels that the Talmud prescribes? In his commentary on the *Siddur,* David Abudarham (Spain, 14th century) cites the ruling of the renowned halakhist, Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet (Spain and Algeria, 1326–1408): "And [Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet] wrote in *Hiddushei HaRIVaSH* that only a person who is pious and God-fearing, with whom the *Shekhinah* dwells, should recite this blessing, [i.e., the words before entering the bathroom]. However, other people should not recite it because [its implication that a person is worthy to be accompanied by angels] gives the appearance of arrogance."[29] Following Abudarham, Joseph Karo concludes: "It appears that because of this [ruling], the recitation of this passage has been discontinued in our generation."[30] I am not familiar with the historical and cultural factors that influenced this ruling of the RIVaSH, but I believe that its observance has obscured some of the spiritual riches that *Asher Yatzar* has to offer as a *berakhah. Asher Yatzar* is, in my opinion, unparalleled in Jewish liturgy as praise of and thanks to God for the miracle of the body. It is an excellent example of how rabbinic Judaism cultivates our sense of what Professor Max Kadushin called normal mysticism.[31] It helps the worshipper to experience God's wondrous, creative power even and especially during an act as mundane as excretion.[32] However, as I have demonstrated above, its other meanings only emerge fully when it is recited as a response to the warning given by the worshipper to his or her angels prior to entering the bathroom. One does not need to believe literally in the existence of accompanying angels to recognize that there are aspects of daily life, especially the decline of one's bodily functions and one's mortality, which at any moment can banish our sense of being fully human, our "angelic dimension." Each morning we, our loved ones, and the people to whom we minister awaken, hopefully healthy and refreshed, with our bodies working well. Then, often quite suddenly, we find ourselves or our loved ones trapped in painful, life-threatening illnesses, injuries and disabilities that rob us of our dignity and beat us into resignation to the "inexorable march towards death." Or, we might remain healthy for many years only to watch helplessly as the blessing of longevity is transformed gradually into a curse of old age in which

our minds and souls suffer inside of dying bodies. Our angels—and God—are nowhere to be found, and we are overwhelmed by the physical decay and looming sense of mortality that make us feel more animal than angel. If we are blessed with the ability to self-heal and with access to good medical intervention, we can recover and remain alive and independent for as long as possible. We are able to "stand again with the angels before God's throne" in full health and dignity, thankful for God's marvelous handiwork, and cognizant of how precious, complex, and fragile it is.

We do not need to be sick or in crisis to appreciate this, nor does *Asher Yatzar* have to be read exclusively as a *berakhah* that addresses only one aspect of human mal/function. The warning to the angels and the words of *Asher Yatzar* are liturgical bookends of a common, even coarse, yet extraordinary human experience. They ritualize that physical experience, lending it deeper significance. These passages help us to imagine all of our physical functions, however base, as daily "mini-dramas" in which each of us enters the potential "place of danger" that is the physical world outside and inside our bodies. For the Talmud, the drama proceeds as our "angels wait outside the door," and we put our lives and our human dignity on hold for a long moment, unsure if our God-given capacities for healthy functioning and self-healing will work. Then, once again, our openings and hollow tubes open and close as programmed. We leave the "throne room," the place of potential danger, and, uttering *Asher Yatzar,* we find ourselves ushered before the divine throne, if only for one moment. There, we praise God for the awesome blessings of body and life, and for the renewed opportunity to stand before God among (and as one of!) the celestial beings. At that moment, we again share with God the divine secret that we learn each time we are fully aware of *any* of our physical functions and their potential discontents: We are both "animal and angel," and we are neither one fully. To be human is to comprehend that we will break down and die, something that the other animal species cannot grasp and that the other angels cannot experience. When we say to God that these things are "revealed and known before Your throne of glory," we are actually telling ourselves that we too understand them, and that we can respond to them with wisdom.

Can clergy and other spiritually-oriented caregivers use these insights as healing imagery and conversation at the hospital bedside and in other spiritual care situations? I recommend that we can and we should. We pray *Asher Yatzar* with friends, family and congregants to ask God's continued blessings of the body's capacity for self-healing and to express deep wonder and gratitude to God for the body and for that healing. We teach (and hopefully model in our personal lives and worship practices) profound daily gratitude that we awaken each morning and that we function well most of the time. I suggest that we can expand that sense of gratitude. Every day, in health and in sickness, we can thank God for the "angelic" dimension of human dignity: our consciousness of the fact that, though we share some important things with other animals, we are truly, meaningfully different from them. When our bodies break down, our independence wanes, and we feel our sense of personal dignity weakening, we can find refuge in intimate dialogue with God, who holds onto all mysteries and secrets. We can ask God to restore our angels to us, recalling Abaye's words. "Guard me, help me, support me, wait for me." In those moments of sickness, we can also find strength and hope in the fact that we are much more than our bodies.

Admittedly, these are abstract concepts and images. Many people think in far more concrete terms than I have presented, and even a person who can grasp these ideas might be unable to do so when he or she is suffering and in pain from illness, disability or other crisis. Further, it is easy to open any *Siddur* and share the text and ideas of *Asher Yatzar* with others in a teaching or spiritual care situation. It is harder to share the preceding passages about the angels in an accessible, written form, and harder still to relate these ideas, even as metaphors, to contemporary Jews who have not thought in "angelic terms" for hundreds of years. Nonetheless, the spiritual and pastoral value of viewing *Asher Yatzar* in these ways makes it worthwhile for rabbis and other caregivers to incorporate these insights into their work of spiritual care, teaching, and modeling. Further, in a time of "new age" popular interest in matters such as angels and unseen protective forces, our Talmudic passages are a rich, traditional resource for very comforting imagery when ministering to those who suffer illness or are in crisis. Though we are not likely to resurrect this "rumor of angels" in the formal liturgy of *Asher Yatzar,* it is still available to us in the spiritual care that we provide.[33] For instance, the person who is about to go for major surgery or who is facing dangerous challenges to physical health can be encouraged to imagine those divine messengers of

ancient times standing by one's side as companions on his or her journey. A guided meditation in which the person comes before *kisei hakavod* and pours out his or her heart to God could be helpful as well.

After hundreds of years in its present form, *Asher Yatzar* will most likely continue to stand alone, without the warnings to the accompanying angels that should precede it.[34] Liturgically and spiritually, this is unfortunate but not tragic. The *berakhah* as it is found in the *Siddur* alludes to everything that I have stated above; it will continue to occupy an honored place in *birkot hashahar,* in daily Jewish ritual life, and at the bedsides of people who are ill and suffering. The latter is where our most intense dramas take place on a stage that shifts relentlessly between life and death, "the angelic and the animal." Whatever side of the bed we are on, as patients or as pastors, *Asher Yatzar* binds us together with God, the angels and each other in a chorus of gratitude for being formed with wisdom, opening upon opening, hollow organ upon hollow organ.

NOTES

1. See Ismar Elbogen (Raymond Scheindlin, trans.), *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History,* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society/The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993), p. 78. See also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefillah,* 7:5–9, and *Seder Amram Gaon: Birkot Hashahar,* and *Sefer Kol Bo,* #1.

2. For *Siddur* commentaries see in particular David Abudarham, *Sefer Abudarham Hashalem* (Jerusalem: Makhon Mishnat Dan/Even Yisrael Publishing, 5755), pp. 39–46; Seligman Baer, *Seder Avodat Yisrael* (New York: Schocken Books, 5697), pp. 36–37; S. Goldman, ed., *Otzar HaTefillot* (New York: Otzar Sefarim, 1915/New York: Hebraica Press, 1966), pp. 57–58 (112–113); *Siddur Tefillah L'Moshe: Otzar HaRishonim Al HaTefillah, Vol. I* (Jerusalem: Makhon Maadanei Asher, 2001) pp. 2–10; Lawrence Hoffman, ed., *My People's Prayerbook, Vol. 5, Birkhot Hashahar* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing), pp. 108–116; Yissachar Jacobson, *Netiv Binah, Vol. 1: Tefillot Hol* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Publishing, 2001) pp. 156–157. Rishonic comments on *Asher Yatzar* include Rashi on B. Berakhot, 60b, s.v. *U-Mafli Laasot*; Tosafot on B. Berakhot, 60b, s.v. *Mafli La-Asot* and s.v. *Asher Yatzar;* Shmuel Eidels, *Hiddushei Halakhot V'Aggadot Ha-MaHaRSHa* to B. Berakhot, 60b, s.v. *Asher Yatzar Ei Ha-Adam B'hokhmah;* Yaacov bar Asher, *Arbaah Turim, Orah Hayyim,* # 6:1; *Bet Yosef* to *Arbaah Turim, Orah Hayyim* #6, s.v. *Vi-Varekh Birkat Asher Yatzar;* Joseph Karo, *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim,* #6:1.

3. Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice,* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), ch. 1.

4. See, for example, Abudarham, *Sefer Abudarham Hashalem,* Baer, *Seder Avodat Yisrael* and Goldman, *Otzar Hatefillot.*

5. Jewish Publication Society eds. and trans., *Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1999), p. 1217.

6. See the footnotes at the bottom of p. 1217.

7. *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 1392. For a full exposition of the historical context and meaning of Ezekiel's lament over Tyre, see pp. 1390–1395.

8. See B. Megillah 3a. See also B. Bava Batra 134a and B. Sukkah 28a.

9. The Aramaic is *d'inun tzorkhakh,* similar to the euphemistic use in Hebrew of *tzorekh,* "need, necessity": "*Adam oseh tzorchav,*" "a person performs his needs," is a euphemism for relieving oneself.

10. See also *Leviticus Rabbah,* 20:2, s.v. *Amar Rabbi Levi b'shem Rabbi Hama bar Hanina.*

11. See Nahum Sarna, *Jewish Publication Society Commentary on Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 17, comment to Genesis 2:7.

12. The blurring of these distinctions is already found in later biblical passages such as Isaiah 45:7 that use the two words in a parallelism, i.e., *yotzeir or u-vorei hoshekh.* This same blurring of distinctions appears to occur in the *berakhah, Elohai Neshama,* found near *Asher Yatzar* in the Talmud: *Atah v'ratah Atah y'tzartah,* "You, God, created and fashioned my soul."

13. The Vatican manuscript of the Jerusalem Talmud (#133) uses the word *v'asita,* "You made," instead of the word *bara,* in its version of *Asher Yatzar.* This is derived from the verb *asah* which is used in Genesis 1 but is not included in the Babylonian Talmud's version of the *berakhah.*

14. See also *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3, s.v. *Rabbi Tanhuma Patah.* In all of my translations of the *Talmud* passages that follow, single, broken lines indicate an *amora* as the speaker. Double, solid lines indicate *stama d'gmara* as the speaker. Passages with no preceding lines indicate *mishnayot* and *baraitot.*

15. B. Berakhot 60b records a variant reading of *hallulim, hallulim,* the words *hallalim, hallalim,* that was rejected by the Tur in favor of *hallulim,* which is used in our *Siddurim.*

16. Ecclesiastes 3:19b.

17. The standard edition of the Babylonian Talmud presents all of M. Berakhot 9 as one long text with no distinctions between individual *mishnayot.* This is not the case in contemporary editions of the Mishnah. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz numbers this mishnah as 9:2.

18. The underlying assumptions of the *baraita* and its ensuing Talmudic comments are that if the floor of the bath house caved in the patrons would be burned to death by the hot coals and fire underneath; the prayer about sin perhaps implies

the concern that bath houses in Roman Palestine were rife with promiscuous activity, homosexual or otherwise.

19. Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology For the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) ch. 9, especially pp. 230–242.

20. For a more detailed exposition of such purposeful structuring of *sugyot,* see Hauptman, *Rereading The Rabbis.* Also see Jacob Neusner, ed. and trans., *The Talmud of Babylonia, An Academic Commentary: #1 Bavli Tractate Berakhot* (Atlanta: Scholars Press for The South Florida Academic Commentary Series, 1994–6, 1999), especially pp. v–xii, 409–411, 439–443, 525, and 532–539.

21. Many of the statements in rabbinic literature about the accompanying angels are based upon *Psalm* 91:11: "He will charge His angels to you, to protect you on all your paths." See *Sifre B'Midbar, Piska* 40, s.v., *Y'varekhekha.* See also BT Hagigah 16a, s.v., *Darash Rabbi Yehudah, Exodus Rabbah* 32:6, s.v., *Davar Aher,* and *Midrash Tanhuma,* (Warsaw), *Parshat Pekudei,* #3.

22. See B. Berakhot 62a, s.v. *Amar Rabbi Tanhum bar Hanilai,* ff. His statement that modesty in the bathroom saves a person from being attacked there by snakes, scorpions, and evil spirits is followed by a number of stories of *amoraim* protecting themselves from evil spirits in bathrooms.

23. B. Berakhot 60b; *Leviticus Rabbah* (Vilna and Margoliot), 29:9, s.v. *Davar Aher Bahodesh Hashvii; Esther Rabbah* (Vilna), 8:7, s.v. *Vatomer Esther.* Eisenstein's *Otzar Hamidrashim* records three other uses of the phrase in minor midrashic works that I did not focus upon above.

24. See I Kings 22:19, Isaiah 6:1–3, Ezekiel 1:26–28, and Daniel 7:9–10.

25. See Gershom Scholem, (George Lichtheim trans.) *Major Trends In Jewish Mysticism,* (New York, Schocken Books, 1941), ch. 2.

26. See M. Hagigah 2:1, T. Hagigah 2:3, (Lieberman Edition), J. Hagigah 2:1, (77b).

27. *Genesis Rabbah* (Vilna, Teodor-Albeck), 1:5, s.v. *Breishit Bara; Leviticus Rabbah,* (Vilna), 29:9, s.v. *Davar Aher Bahodesh Hashvii;* BT *Avodah Zarah* 3b, s.v. *V'Ha Amar Rav Yehudah;* BT *Yoma* 86a, s.v. *Amar Rabbi Levi;* B. Shabbat 88b, s.v. *V'Amar Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi;* B. Shabbat 152b, s.v. *Tanya Rabbi Eliezer Omer; Lamentations Rabbah,* (Vilna), 2:2, s.v. *Eiḥah Yaiv B'Apo; Batei Midrashot* I. *Pirkei Heikhalot* 11:2, s.v. *V'hei-idu Lahem;* B. Berakhot 7a, s.v. *Tanya Amar Rabbi Yishmael Ben Elisha.*

28. Though I did not examine them closely in this paper, other rabbinic sources that view the human being as a complex combination of "animal and angel" and that identify humans with the angelic realm have influenced my thinking about *Asher Yatzar.* Most notable is Genesis Rabbah 8:11, s.v. *Zakhar U-n'keivah B'raam.* For a fuller exploration of the rabbinic perspective on humans and angels see, Ephraim Urbach (Israel Abrahams, trans.) *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs,* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1979), ch. 8.

29. David Abudarham, *Sefer Abudarham Hashalem* (Jerusalem: Makhon Mishnat Dan, 5755), p. 40.

30. Joseph Karo, *Bet Yosef* to *Arbaah Turim, Oraḥ Ḥayyim,* 3:1. I am not certain why the commentators cited above who preceded Perfet and Abudarham failed to comment on *Asher Yatzar* in its larger Talmudic context as I have done. Perhaps the idea of accompanying angels had already waned by the early middle ages, and the RiVaSH merely formalized the discarding of this practice in his responsum.

31. Max Kadushin, *Worship and Ethics: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1963), ch. 7. See especially p. 168.

32. My deepest thanks to my teacher, Professor Saul Wachs, for pointing this out to me many years ago in a course that I took with him at Hebrew University. My thanks also to Professor Wachs for inspiring my academic and pastoral interest in *Asher Yatzar* over the years. His influence is reflected throughout this paper.

33. Obviously, not all references to accompanying angels have been expunged from Jewish liturgy. Prayers such as *Shalom Aleikhem* and the Shema for bedtime are two outstanding examples of the persistence of images of accompanying angels in Jewish liturgy. Why they entered Jewish liturgy and the prayers preceding *Asher Yatzar* did not is worthy of further exploration.

34. In fact, even without the introductory prayers prescribed by the *Talmud, Asher Yatzar* at times immediately precedes *Elohai Neshama* in the *Siddur.* The new *Siddur Sim Shalom* follows this arrangement, in keeping with the ruling of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan in his *Sefer Mishnah Brurah, Oraḥ Ḥayyim,* 6:3, n. 12. The juxtaposition of both *brakhot* allows—I believe—for a daily liturgical emphasis by the worshipper on the dual notion of human beings as body and soul, "animal and angel."

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