Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Foreword

The Siddur: Book of Jewish Faith

There is *tefillah* and there is *seder ha-tefillah*: the act of prayer and the order of prayer, and they are two very different things.

We can all relate to prayer in its most primal sense. We turn to God in high emotion – fear, joy, guilt, regret, hope, anxiety, or thanksgiving. Something deep within us feels moved to speak to that which is beyond us, to the Soul of the universe, the Author of being, the ever-lasting arms that hold us in their embrace.

Such were the prayers of our ancestors in faith: Yaakov fearing his encounter with Esav, the Israelites as they crossed the divided Sea, Moshe begging God to forgive the people, Chanah pleading for a child. Maimonides sees this kind of spontaneous expression – specifically the prayers of the Patriarchs – as the historic and halakhic basis of prayer as such. It has no set times and no set text. It can be long: Moshe once prayed for forty days and forty nights. It can be short: Moshe's prayer for his sister to be cured of leprosy was a mere five words, "Please God, heal her now."

Prayer in this sense is a signal of transcendence, an instinct that tells us we are not alone in a tragically configured universe that is deaf to our cries, blind to our fate, indifferent to our existence. There is someone there, One we cannot imagine, yet One to whom we can speak the single most important word in the entire lexicon of prayer: *Atah*, You.[1] The poet laureate of this kind of prayer was King David, and to this day *Sefer Tehillim*, the Book of Psalms, is its most powerful expression. Prayer is the redemption of solitude.

Yet most prayer is not like this most of the time. It has a *seder*. There are fixed times, fixed words, fixed gestures that seemingly have nothing to do with the volatility of emotion. We call the book of prayer a *siddur*. *Seder* and *siddur* mean order. Why does prayer have an order? And why this order, not that? What guided the shapers of collective prayer, in a long process that began with the Men of the Great Assembly and continued for some two thousand years? What are the basic features of this Temple-built-with-words that Jews have entered ever since, and even before, the physical Temple was destroyed?

To find answers to these questions was the task I set myself when I came to write a new translation of and commentary to the prayers several years ago. I want in this essay to share one of the discoveries I made in the course of that journey. Not because it is new – the great truths in Judaism never are – but because it is a fact with the power of changing our understanding of what formal prayer is and why it has the structure it does.

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The journey began at a point far distant from the world of prayer. I had been reading several books in which contemporary Jewish thinkers had been reviving an argument first made in 1783 by the German Jewish scholar Moses Mendelssohn[2] when he argued that Judaism does not have beliefs; it has laws. It is not revealed truth but revealed legislation. It is a religion less of doctrines than of deeds.

One argument put forward in this new version of an old idea was that the *Mishnah*, the sourcebook of *Torah She-Be-Al Peh*, the Oral Law, speaks about beliefs in only one paragraph of its six orders, -sixty-three tractates, and countless chapters: the *mishnah* at the beginning of the tenth chapter of *Sanhedrin* that itemizes those who do not have a share in the World to Come. Among them are several instances of people who deny one or other of the fundamentals of faith. But that is all. If faith were fundamental to Judaism surely we would expect to see more written about it, even a tractate

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1. Note that most versions of the *Amidah* have the word "*Atah*" as the first of the middle blessings. The ability to say "You" is what makes prayer possible in the first place, and also what differentiates between what Yehuda Ha-Levi called the God of Aristotle and the God of Avraham.

2. In his book *Jerusalem*.

devoted to it. Not until Maimonides in the twelfth century does anyone in Judaism formulate a list of the principles of faith.

I was certain the argument was mistaken. The great controversies in Judaism – between Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes in the late Second Temple period, between Rabbanites and Karaites in the eighth to twelfth centuries, and between Orthodoxy and others in the nineteenth and twentieth century – were essentially about belief: the authority of the Oral Law, the existence or otherwise of life after death, fate versus free will, the Divine authorship of the Torah, and so on. Other kinds of argument – about *Halakhah* for example, or the meaning of a biblical verse – never had the power to create schism. If Judaism is not about belief, why then should such arguments have split the Jewish people so deeply?

That was when, with a shock of discovery, I understood *where* these battles were fought: in the texts and structures of Jewish prayer. To give a simple example: A *baraita* tells us that originally, in the -Second Temple, there were four paragraphs to the *Shema*, not three. The additional one was the Ten Commandments. However, continues the -*baraita*, the practice was discontinued because of the murmurings, the false claims, of the sectarians.

We do not know who these sectarians were, proto-Christians or some other group, but evidently they claimed that only the Ten Commandments were binding because only they had been given in public at Mount Sinai in the presence of the whole people. The others, Moshe made up on his own. Such was the heretical claim, and we see immediately that the Sages confronted it not in the *Beit Midrash* but in the *Beit Keneset*, in the synagogue.

The most striking example concerns what was clearly one of the most fraught disputes between the Pharisees and Sadducees. The *mishnah* in *Sanhedrin*, listing those who do not have a share in the World to Come, mentions first "one who denies that the resurrection of the dead is a doctrine of the Torah." The Sadducees, Josephus tells us, believed that the soul is not immortal and there is no afterlife. Death is the end. The Pharisees passionately believed otherwise. There is a World to Come, and those who died will live again.

What is fascinating is how this idea was canonized at the heart of Jewish life. Look at the second paragraph of the *Amidah* and you will see that the resurrection is referred to no less than six times, five times explicitly and once figuratively, "who keeps His faith with those who lie in the dust." The point could not be clearer. If you wish to be part of the community of faith you must subscribe to the faith of the community. A Sadducee entering a synagogue and invited to lead the prayers would be forced to make a choice: Do I say the words that commit me to a belief I do not share or do I leave? Children will have grown up hearing daily the words *techiyat ha-meitim* said over and over again. As a place to educate people in faith and define its parameters beyond misunderstanding, nowhere was more appropriate than the synagogue.

Throughout the *siddur* you will find prayers whose presence -testifies to a controversy about a principle of faith. Then I realized why there is so little about faith in the *Mishnah*. The Sages were purists when it came to genre. They had different literatures for different areas of study. The *Mishnah* was a committing to writing of *Torah She-Be-Al Peh*, the Oral Law. *Midrash halakhah* – *Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifrei* – dealt with the connection between the Written and Oral Laws. *Midrash aggadah* was about non-halakhic biblical interpretation. Each topic had its own place within the library of Jewish texts. The tractate of faith, *masekhet emunah*, was the *siddur*, the book of prayer. Judaism had principles of faith long before Maimonides, and they were set out in *seder ha-tefillah*, the content and structure of the prayers.

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Once that initial insight became clear, a pattern began to emerge. We see this most clearly in the case of *Shabbat*. The *Shabbat* prayers have a unique feature – the evening, morning, and afternoon *Amidot* are all different. In the evening the central blessing begins, "You sanctified the seventh day for Your name's sake as the culmination of the creation of heaven and earth." In the morning we speak of Moshe bringing down in his hands "the tablets of stone on which was engraved the observance of the Sabbath." In the afternoon we say, "You are one and Your name is one, and who is like your people, a nation unique on earth?"

There is something familiar about this sequence. Already in the Middle Ages commentators pointed out that the three prayers spoke about *Shabbat* in the past, present, and future. More fundamentally they referred sequentially to three fundamentals of Jewish faith: *Creation* (the seventh day), *Revelation* (Moshe and the stone tablets), and *Redemption* (when "God will be one and His name one"). According to R. Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, all thirteen of Maimonides' principles of faith can be fitted into these three broad categories. Franz Rosenzweig gave eloquent expression to the same idea in the modern age. So the prayers of *Shabbat* are structured to give systemic expression to the fundamentals of Jewish belief.

Once you recognize this structure, you notice it elsewhere also. It is the basic shape of the three blessings that surround the *Shema*. The first, which in the morning begins "who forms light and creates darkness," is self-evidently about Creation. The second, "With great love," and in the evening, "With everlasting love," is about Revelation, the

giving of the Torah as an act of love. The third, set at the Red Sea as the Israelites sang their song, ends with the words, "who redeemed Israel." So we have the same pattern: Creation, Revelation, and Redemption.

Why just these three? Because Creation represents the relationship between God and the natural universe. Revelation is God's relationship with us. And when we apply Revelation to Creation the result is Redemption. Redemption is what happens when, by an act of God or by our acts when they are aligned with the will of God, we bring the world-that-is closer to the world-that-ought-to-be.

Having said this, we can now see that the same pattern forms the basic structure of the morning prayers. They begin with *Pesukei De--Zimrah*, the "Verses of Praise," a series of verses and psalms about Creation, beginning, "Blessed is He who spoke and the world came into being." Then we move to public prayer, beginning with *Barkhu* and -culminating in the -*Amidah*, the whole of which is a sequence of entering, sitting, and standing in the presence of God. "Being in the presence" is Revelation. The prayers then recommence with *Ashrei*, and in the prayers that follow the key line is: "A *Redeemer* will come to Zion." Again, Redemption.

A miniature version of the pattern is contained in *Tehillim* chapter 19, the first of the extra psalms we say in the *Pesukei De-Zimrah* of *Shabbat*. Non-Jewish commentators have sometimes been puzzled by the structure of this psalm, which seems to change subject dramatically in the middle, from talking about the universe ("The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands") to talking about Torah ("The Lord's Torah is perfect"). The last line seems to change the subject again: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart find favor before You, Lord, my rock and my Redeemer." By now, though, we recognize the pattern: first Creation, then Revelation, then Redemption.

It was the mathematician Benoît B. Mandelbrot who coined the word "fractal" to describe the phenomenon in nature whereby the same basic shape is replicated on different scales or levels of magnitude (for example, a single leaf of a fern looks like a whole fern plant). That is what we find in prayer. Much of it is built on the fractal of Creation-Revelation-Redemption at different levels of magnitude, sometimes in a single paragraph, sometimes over a whole service, and in the case of *Shabbat* spread out over a whole day.

It turns out, in other words, that one of the basic structuring principles of the *siddur* is Jewish faith in its most basic, triadic form. Faith *is* central to Judaism, and the reason it is not discussed in the *Mishnah* is that it belongs elsewhere, to the act of prayer.

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If this is so, then something radical is being implied. If the *siddur* is indeed the book of Jewish faith, then it is conspicuously different from other books. It is not a book we study. It is a book with which we pray. It is not a volume whose contents we analyze with reflective intellect. It is one whose words we say with passion and devotion. The fundamental difference between theology and prayer is that in the former we speak *about* God and in the latter we speak *to* God. That is one of the -differentiating features in the Book of Job between the eponymous hero and his "-comforters." They speak about God. Iyov begs to be able to speak to God. At the end of the book it is Iyov, not his friends, who is vindicated.

I believe the Sages felt that theology – abstract detached speculation about matters Divine – was alien to the Jewish understanding of God. God is a "Thou" not an "It." God is someone we connect with through the word *Atah*, "You." Judaism is fundamentally a religion of holy words, sacred conversation. In revelation, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God. Or to put it slightly differently, in Torah God reveals Himself to us, and in *tefillah*, we reveal ourselves to God.[3] That, at the deepest level, is what the Sages meant when they said (*Berakhot* 26b) that "*ein sichah ela tefillah*," literally, "conversation is a form of prayer." Conversation is the meeting of two selves, two centers of consciousness, each affirming the reality of the other. By setting the elements of Jewish faith in the context of prayer, the Sages expressed their belief that the reality of God can never be caught by philosophizing. Like love, or music, or the reality of another human being, so faith can only be understood through direct experience. We do not contemplate our faith – we daven it.

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What is the source of this three-part architectonic of prayer? The answer lies in one of the most famous visions in the Torah, when Yaakov, fleeing the wrath of his brother Esav, finds himself alone at night and has a dream in which he sees a ladder, set on earth yet reaching heaven, with angels ascending and descending.

Many midrashic interpretations have been given of this dream, but the most compelling is that of the *Zohar* which sees it as a metaphor for prayer. This makes eminent sense in terms of the continuation of the passage: "When

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3. I do not mean by this that God needs our prayers to understand what we are thinking and feeling. He knows that directly. What I mean is that when we pray, we self-consciously and deliberately open ourselves to God.

Yaakov awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'" The house of God – this would one day become the Temple, and later still, a name for the synagogue. The gate of heaven: this is prayer. And the result of prayer is that we come to see that "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it."

When we pray, we begin like the angels by ascending – through the poetry of creation in the *Pesukei De-Zimrah* – from the universe to the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Then, as we reach the top of the ladder, it is as if we were in heaven with the glory of God all around us, whose highpoint is the *Kedushah* with its reenactment of the praises of the angels as seen in mystic visions by Yeshayahu and Yechezkel. Then like angels we descend, ready for our task of transforming the world as God's emissaries: the work of redemption. Prayer is Yaakov's ladder, the words are the rungs and we – inadequate though we may feel – are the angels.

Not only is this the structure of Yaakov's dream. Many centuries later a similar idea resurfaced at the culmination of the greatest single work of Jewish philosophy, Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. He devotes the last chapters of the book to an interpretation of a saying of the prophet Yirmiyahu:

> Let not the wise boast of their wisdom
> or the strong boast of their strength
> or the rich boast of their riches,
> but let the one who boasts boast about this:
> that they have the understanding to know Me…

The prophet begins by listing all the reasons human beings seek to be creative: to acquire wisdom, develop strength, or acquire wealth. All of these, though, are secondary, trivial in comparison with the ultimate aim of the spiritual life which is to come as close as our understanding allows, to knowing God, that is (in the Hebrew sense of the verb to know), to develop an intimate relationship: revelation. At this stage we expect the prophet Yirmiyahu and the philosopher Maimonides to stop. What can there be higher than revelation? But the verse continues:

> That I am the Lord, who exercises kindness,
> justice, and righteousness on earth,
> for in these I delight,
> declares the Lord.

The life of the spirit does not end in revelation. For having climbed the mountain, we must then descend to the valley, to the world of everyday, and ensure that our understanding has a transformative effect on the world, by exercising kindness, justice, and righteousness, the great attributes of God Himself that become our natural instincts once we have truly fathomed what God seeks from us.

The *seder ha-tefillah*, the shape and structure of prayer, is thus a journey through the stages of faith itself, from Creation to Revelation to Redemption, from earth to heaven and back again, from God's *world* to God's *word* to God's *work*, the work of redemption in which He has invited us to become His partners. It is an ongoing seminar in living the reality of God's presence in our lives, and like repeated exercise of any kind, it develops in us strengths and reflexes we would not have otherwise. We learn to hear the music of God in Creation, the presence of God in Revelation, and the call of God in the not-yet-completed task of Redemption. That is what *tefillah* achieves at its deepest level. *Prayer changes us so that we can change the world.*

Essays on General Themes in Prayer