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Visions of Reform Judaism
Rabbis Ellenson and Hoffman
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Prayer as a Second Language

During my HUC year in Israel, I joined a committee of students charged with planning the Yom HaShoah service to be held in the *beit k'nesset* on campus. Each of us decided to write some form of *iyun* to be read at different points throughout the service. I struggled with what to say, both because prayer was not (is not?) my primary path into Jewish life, and because especially in light of the Shoah, prayer might seem empty, naive, and foolish -- or challenging, at the very least. Out of this struggle came the following reading, which was also used by Rollin last year in her cantorial practicum about Yom HaShoah:

> When the shadow of suffering darkens the sky,
> when the gray cloud of grief and death looms overhead,
> how can we praise God?
>
> We praise God for the gift and responsibility of memory.
> We praise God to honor those who died with God's Name on their lips.
> We praise God as an act of defiance against those who desecrate God's image in humanity.
> We praise God so that evil and indifference will not have the last word.
>
> When clouds and shadows blot out the sun,
> how can we not praise God?

In the year-in-Israel service, I read it individually, and I remember an audible congregational response after the final question (something like, "Hmmm."). Rollin employed the reading in her practicum as a collective one -- probably a better use -- so that the first person plural was recited together, and the congregation had the reading in front of them to process visually before and after the physical act of reading.

My point for the purpose of this paper is simply this: despite the theology of prayer underlying my reading, I have only recently come to appreciate fully that prayer is an experience within which language works utterly differently than in scientific or everyday usage. I consider it actually good that this realization is an ongoing process for me, because I imagine most of my future congregants can relate. So I would like to devote the rest of this paper to reflections on my own intellectual and experiential process toward training my linguistic faculty to make space for a new understanding of prayer.

I find particularly compelling those articulations of Judaism that refuse to reduce it to an intellectual or philosophical essence. Michael Wyschogrod, whom I'm reading for my thesis, writes in *Body of Faith* of his firm belief that Judaism is not merely a religion of the spirit, but most definitely a religion of the body. God chose Abraham and his *seed*, a particular father of a particular family. This corporeal election encompasses the fullness of human living and demands more than a Maimonidean faith commitment (Wyschogrod, in fact, rejects much of Maimonides' philosophy of Judaism). Praising Karl Barth's Christian theological approach, Wyschogrod writes,

> He plunges his reader into the world of faith without defensive introductions, which would necessarily have to begin by taking the standpoint of unbelief seriously and which therefore might end in unbelief.[1]

Western philosophy, he continues to argue, necessarily distorts religious traditions because it forces them to fit its universalizing, rationalist mold. Wyschogrod's skepticism toward modern philosophy speaks to our present discussion, because we liberal Jews are immersed in the

[1] Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God and the People Israel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1996), p. 79.

intellectual and linguistic framework of Western, rational thought. When prayer doesn't fit against this backdrop, we tend to reject it as nonsense.

Henry Slonimsky offers another opportunity to reorient our approach to prayer. For him, prayer as an act is *"*an *Urphaenomen,* an aboriginal and basic event rooted in the very character of the human spirit, a kind of archetype of the human mind."[2] The words of prayer give voice to our deepest fears and needs, joys and aspirations. The siddur, then, is not a cold historical document or an academic publication. "And if you want to know what Judaism is," he says, "the question which has no answer if debated on the plane of intellectual argument -- you can find out by absorbing that book."[3] Like Wyschogrod's belief in Israel's carnal election, Slonimsky's description of the siddur reveals his commitment to a holistic Judaism that encompasses the fullness of the human condition, not merely the noetic. Before exploring how we can heed his call to let worship embrace us in the fullness of our lived experience, let us turn to a third contributor to our discussion.

In "Healing the Sick as an Exercise in Religious Metaphor," Rabbi Larry Hoffman writes of the power of prayer as metaphor. Through the use of metaphor, he, too, affirms Judaism's embrace of the fullness of human experience. He offers a holistic conception of Jewish prayer, particularly in healing contexts, as expressing "the Jewish metaphor of a human life."[4] Such metaphors can help us live with fullness and depth as a "self-conscious animal, in search of the meaning of the construct we call life."[5] "Fail to visit the sick," he warns,

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[2] Henry Slonimsky, "Prayer and a Growing God," *Gates of Understanding* (New York: CCAR & UAHC, 1977), p. 73.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Hoffman, "Healing the Sick as an Exercise in Religious Metaphor," p. 125.

[5] Ibid., p. 129.

> and you fail to apprehend your own journey from birth to death. The beginning of Jewish wisdom is the simple truth that we all will walk the same path together. Life is a path on which we all walk sooner or later.[6]

One is reminded, incidentally, of Donne's admonition against asking for whom the bell tolls: "it tolls for thee."[7] Though Hoffman speaks of healing prayers, we might extend his point to all prayer: when properly given and received, prayer reminds us that we are on a journey called life, helps us to guide the trajectory of our path, and -- when the trajectory reaches beyond our controlling grasp -- helps us make meaning out of the places we find ourselves and the suffering and joy we experience there.

We might take from Wyschogrod, Slonimsky, and Hoffman's approaches a way to affirm a "willing suspension of disbelief"[8] before our coreligionists. Congregants walk in the sanctuary door for various reasons on Shabbat and holidays -- they enjoy the music or the community, or perhaps the cookies -- but surely many of them cannot connect with the words of the siddur as literal truth. If we can wean them, as I am weaning myself, off the deceptively obvious assumption that prayer works like regular arguments or assertions, then we can revitalize worship.

A few months ago, I had occasion to attend Kabbalat Shabbat at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in Chelsea on Jason Kaufman's debut as cantorial intern. Having recently read Heschel on prayer for another course, and thanks to some mix of warmth, intention, and talent on the part of the community and the shlichei tzibur, I took what I can only describe as a quantum leap in my personal prayer. I thought to myself, *What if I sing and recite these words as if I*

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[6] Ibid., p. 126.

[7] John Donne, "Meditation XVII" from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624).

[8] Coincidentally, this concept from literary theory arose in the last two weeks of Merri Arian and Rabbi Nancy Wiener's class, *The Art of Creating Meaningful Worship.* Shira Kline, in a class presentation, and Rabbi David Katz, in a reading, both mentioned it as a necessity for (teaching our congregants) how to approach prayer.

really believe them, and see how it feels? The result was immediate and profound. It was Heschel's awe, with perhaps a little trembling. I felt -- and I'll say this despite its likelihood to cause Dr. Borowitz to raise an eyebrow and frown -- a tingly feeling. I thought to myself, *So this is what it feels like to pray to a personal God, to affirm God's majesty and love, to ascribe ultimate order and meaning to the cosmos*. All it took was the willing suspension of my disbelief. That, and the careful planning and skilled execution of sung and spoken prayer by the shlichei tzibur, in the context of a "warm and welcoming" (really!) congregation.

Returning to where I began, I find in Slonimsky's writing a convergence with my *iyun* on post-Holocaust prayer. What Slonimsky calls "true religion" we might also call prayer: "to insist on God in a Godforsaken world, or rather in a world not yet dominated by God, and thus to call Him into being...in a world which is only partly divine and which must be won for God through the efforts of man -- that is...the culminating idea of Jewish religiosity and Jewish prayer."[9] Prayer as a linguistic act is performative, creating the affirmation of God's existence, goodness, and relationship with humanity in the very saying and doing of ritual. Hence the need for compelling melodies, rituals, and readings.

In addition to proper attention to these practical matters, it is also upon us to facilitate a sensitive reorientation of the Western intellectual bias toward the fullness of human experience. In so doing, we can make Jewish prayer a living and transformative experience, rather than rote recitation or a quaint exercise in artifact appreciation.

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[9] Slonimsky, p. 78-79. For those of us with more existential tendencies, we might think of it this way: where Nietzsche stared into the abyss until it stared back into him, we pray and sing into the abyss until it echoes back with divine overtones...