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## KADDISH AND OTHER ACCIDENTS

It is a commonplace that *Kaddish* was not originally intended to be a prayer for the dead or for mourners; actually, we are told, it is a paean to the glory of the Living God and a prayer for the triumph of His kingdom. This assertion is true, more or less. It is revealing, nonetheless, to note the prominence given this fact, itself an antiquarian item, in most discussions of Jewish prayer. Writers on Jewish prayer—both learned and popular—delight in demonstrating the perverse way in which the *Siddur* has misappropriated prayer-texts, culminating in the printing of the personal, spontaneous meditations of the rabbis (testaments, in themselves, to creativity in prayer) as obligatory liturgy. Even so clear-headed a scholar as Joseph Heinemann stresses the lush, undisciplined variety of liturgical formulation, rather than learning from his own form-critical method the lesson of implicit submission to literary structure.

The ideological basis of this perspective is clear: these discoveries, it is presumed, will liberate the stifled devotional creativity of contemporary Jewry. If such is the ideological thrust, it is terribly naive and optimistic about the nature of human creativity. But my concern will be to argue that accurate as these analyses seem to be, they avoid the phenomenological roots of liturgical development. For such development often derives dynamically from the deepest core of the prayers, rather than growing as a blight upon their surface.

### I

It is true, of course, that a fair number of prayer-book passages are given in the Talmud as the personal prayers of rabbis. For example, the prayer of Rabbi Judah the Prince was:

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My God . . . deliver me . . . from impudent men and from insolence; from an evil man, a bad companion, and a bad neighbor . . . from a hard opponent, be he a man of the covenant or not.<sup>1</sup>

My God, guard my tongue from evil and my tongue from speaking falsehood . . .<sup>2</sup>

was a prayer of Rabina's son. Rava's prayer was:

My God, before I was formed I was of no worth, and now that I have been formed it is as if I have not been formed . . .<sup>3</sup>

It is quite likely, in fact, that more central parts of the liturgy were appropriated from the prayers of respected individuals in yet older times.

There is no doubt, of course, that the Talmud gave these prayers as exemplars of personal devotion (*tahanunim*), and hardly intended to discourage the average Jew from expressing his own individual petitions; on the contrary — the paradigms may well have been intended to stimulate. To stimulate, and possibly to guide — and here we enter the realm of the ambivalent. For these prayers were preserved, originally orally and later in writing. Why? The Talmud is hardly a hagiographic collection of *Lives of the Saints*, and even these intend to impose upon later generations a burden of imitation. Talmudic preservation of the meditations of great individuals can only be explained as an attempt to bequeath their creativity to succeeding generations: this, after all, is the intent of all cultural transmission. Is this heritage a burden or a boon, has the heritage been used wisely or turned against itself — these are, of course, crucial questions. Let us realize, though, that the very event of preservation and transmission was not innocent but had intentions — from the moment that Joshua fixed himself in the tent of Moses — upon our souls. Appropriation by later generations, the discovery that the traditional paragraphs express their own feelings better than they themselves can in their own words (and to explain this appropriation in any more mechanistic way is patently dishonest), would probably delight the recording disciple and the master who permitted — or encouraged — the transmission of the prayer.

II

The liturgical history of our first citation ought itself be studied. It is presently found before the passage "Let a man be God-fearing in secret . . ." which concludes with a reading of *Shema* and the blessing of God as He who "sanctifies Your name in the presence of all men." Now, our citation is found in the Talmud as the meditation by which Rabbi *concluded* his Prayer; yet here it is used as a prayer with which the day *begins*. The text of the meditation, it is true, is most apt for that function, and this doubtless contributed to the shift. But something more may well have been at work: the passages following this citation,<sup>4</sup> it is generally believed, were entered in the *Siddur* along with the *Shema* during an era of Zoroastrian persecutions. If this is so, a meditation asking that God protect the Jew — about to say the forbidden *Shema* — from impudent and evil men, was most appropriate.

The presence of *Shema* at this early-morning juncture ought, also, be studied. The dominant theory (from ancient times till the present) is, as I have noted, that it represents a reaction to persecution. Nonetheless, the practice has persisted long beyond its supposed fifth-century origins, and this despite the fact that the *Shema* is read again, and with much more flourish, later on. Some have it that the *Shema* was introduced because Jews so enriched their services that the regular morning *Shema* was delayed long beyond its required time. I would push this analysis further (not as explanation of historical origin but as phenomenological description): the classic *Siddur* now provides that the *Shema* be read early after rising and just before sleep. The diverse historical origins of these practices notwithstanding, the *Siddur* thus instructs the Jew to take the Biblical statement that "these words be upon your heart when you lie down and when you rise up" quite literally. The experiential vitality of saying the *Shema* last thing at night and early in the morning, its truth to Biblical (*per* rabbinic exegesis) reality, may well be at the heart of these practices.

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### III

The major bloc of *berakhot* said in the morning before the regular communal prayers offers another example. According to the Talmud,<sup>5</sup>

when a man opens his eyes, he should say: "Blessed is He who opens the eyes of the blind," when he stretches and sits up, he should say: "Blessed is He who frees the imprisoned (lit., the bound)," when he dresses, he should say: "Blessed is He who clothes the naked,"

and so on. Yet most praying Jews wait till they have fully risen, washed, and dressed, to offer these praises to God. Thus, the experiential stimulus provided in the Talmud is thoroughly ignored. Some Jews even wait till arriving in synagogue, and hear the blessings recited by the prayer-leader. This development away from Talmudic precedent derives from ninth-tenth century Babylon and Spain; the first practice was initiated by R. Natrona'i *gaon*, who felt that a man ought be properly washed before he uttered God's name (so the *halakhic* dynamic; some historians point out that R. Natronai had an anti-Karaite penchant for routinizing rabbinic ritual), while the second derived from the ignorance of Spanish Jews who did not master the blessings themselves. R. Natrona'i, having broken the Talmudic connection with individual experience, also insisted that all Jews say all the blessings every morning, whether necessary or not (i.e., someone who hadn't slept all night, would nonetheless thank God for "opening the eyes of the blind"). Maimonides (Ra'abad too, it seems) would have nothing to do with any of these reforms, and roundly declared them errors.

But world Jewry did not accept the Maimonidean stricture, and proceeded to recite its blessings in a non-experiential bloc. Was the geonic success, which runs counter to both experiential vitality and Talmudic source, due purely to the authority of the gaonate? Is there any phenomenological sense to this restructuring?

A second glance at the blessings deepens the puzzlement. To thank God for giving vision to the blind when one merely opens one's eyes in the morning is a bit extravagant; to thank Him for

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freeing the imprisoned when one stretches erect is *chutzpah*. Clearly, the liturgic response goes far beyond the experience that stimulates it. Years ago I heard Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik point to the fundamentally ethical and universal sense of these blessings. God is praised, he said, for doing just those things that are man's proper task in life and history. The blessings articulate a program with which to begin the day, not only an individual reaction to being awake. As such, one easily sees the sense in saying them as a bloc, in saying them all whether one has slept all night or not, and even in having them said in the synagogue. The geonic reforms rode on the thrust of the prayer experience itself.

### IV

Finally, on to the *kaddish*. The *kaddish*, of course, is not merely a generalized paean to the glory of God; it is an affirmation of Messianic hope and was said after the Messianic-aggadic conclusion of sessions of study and teaching. It was then taken into the synagogue to express the Messianic hope of the praying community. Finally, mourners appropriated it, too. This last development can be adequately logged; a third-century statement that sincere response to the leader's *kaddish* could open the doors of Paradise; a later legend of R. Akiba teaching an orphan boy to say *kaddish* and *borkhu* as prayer-leader, thus alleviating his father's pain in the Beyond; finally, the custom among European Jews of a special *kaddish* said only by mourners.

In a sense, each step marks a successive degeneration, culminating in the superstitious efficiency with which *kaddish* is now performed. Yet Jews focussed on *kaddish* as more than an element (even a necessary element) in public prayer, from ancient times on. Its phraseology based on Ezekiel's apocalyptic visions of the war of Gog (always assumed to lead to the final resurrection), it became *the* prayer in which the Messianic hope of ultimate perfection crystallized, the prayer for the establishment of God's Kingdom — which meant, of course, the end of human suffering, the righting of all that had gone wrong in the kingdom

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of man. Infused through it all was the numinous presence of God as the guarantor of the eventual dawning of His Kingdom. Naturally, the mourner felt the organic relationship of all this to his sorrow and to his hope, so securely linked, now, to God's certain purpose. Saying *kaddish* is no accident.

### V

Mannheim, I think, points out that phenomenology is the analytical tool of the conservative. This does not mean that its results are false; it means that the conservative wishes to see how appropriately the existing fits together, not how casually or meaninglessly it coagulates. As such, his excess is rationalization, the refusal to acknowledge the historically contingent and the accidental. On the other hand, one does not work on diamonds with a sledgehammer.

### NOTES

1. Birnbaum, P., *Daily Prayer Book*, p. 20.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
3. Birnbaum, *High Holiday Prayer Book*, p. 58.
4. Birnbaum, P., *Daily Prayer Book*, p. 24. Most prayer-books insert the *Akedah* at this point. But the liturgic structure existed as I have described it for many centuries before this insertion was made; moreover, the *Akedah* may have been placed in its present position because it is mentioned as Israel's defense against persecution. "It benefits Israel, while in Exile, to mention the *Akedah* daily, for it protects against evil happenings . . ." (Zohar).
5. b. *Berakhot* 60b.