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PERSONAL AND PUBLIC PRAYER

Rabbinic prayer, it is often said, is paradigmatic of the halakhic enterprise. Here one finds the creative tension of structure and spontaneity, *keva* and *kavanah*, that lies at the heart of Jewish experience; moreover, it is in this area—as in perhaps no other—that the Talmudic sages and their successors acknowledge quite openly their concern for the integrity of each component, the delicate balance to be maintained if one is not to overwhelm the other, and the integration of both in the worship of God. How characteristically suggestive, for example, is the very term *avodah she-ba-lev* (“the service in the heart”), a construct that fuses both structure and spontaneity as the definition of prayer.¹

It is to be expected that there would be much discussion about the necessary proportions of each of these elements in the maintenance of prayer as a durable and meaningful institution. Indeed, the two alternate sources for rabbinic prayer noted by the Talmud have been understood to bear crucial implications as to the minimum of attentiveness (*kavanah*) needed while praying. As is well known, one view saw the statutory *amidah* prayers as corresponding to certain sacrificial offerings, the other saw them as concretizations of the practice of the Patriarchs.² Some medievals understood the need for *kavanah* to hang in the balance:³

And I have heard from R. Jacob of Wurzburg that according to the view that the statutory prayers correspond to the *tamid* sacrifices, a man may pray without *kavanah*, on occasion, and yet fulfill the command. For it is shown . . . in the beginning of Zebahim that sacrifices brought neither with *kavanah* nor with deliberately improper intent are fit, and enable the owner to satisfy the requirement . . . However, it is certainly superior to pray attentively . . .

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Though the textual-legal dynamic here seemingly reflects only wooden intellectualizing, a moment's reflection bares the phenomenological-psychological dynamic.

On the other hand, one will also find the discussions as to the impregnability of structure, the degree to which it ought or ought not be compromised or made more flexible, in the interests of the individual experience. Not all these discussions bear directly on the tension of structure and spontaneity or devotion; yet while on the periphery of that dynamic, they are within its orbit. Occasionally, one can point to both the "timeless" components of the on-going discussion and the momentum of its historical resolution. One such instance is afforded in *Abodah Zarah* 7b-8a:⁴

Said R. Aha b. Minyomi to Abaye: A great man has come from our place, but whatever he says he is told ought to be suppressed and left unsaid.

He replied: There is one instance in which we do follow his ruling. It is taught: Nahum the Mede says: One may ask for one's own needs in the course of the Benediction concluding "Who heareth prayer."

As to this ruling, he said, an exception had to be made, for it is hanging on strong ropes! It is taught: R. Eliezer says: One should first pray for his own needs and then recite the Prayer . . . But R. Joshua said: One should first recite the Prayer and then pray for one's own needs . . . The sages said, however, the decision is neither according to the one nor according to the other, but that one should pray for his personal needs at the Benediction concluding with "Who heareth prayer."

Rab Judah in the name of Samuel declared that the Halakhah is that one prays for his personal needs at the Benediction ending with "Who heareth prayer."

Said R. Judah, the son of Samuel b. Shilath, in the name of Rab: Even though it was said that one prays for his private needs at "Who heareth prayer," nevertheless, if he is disposed to supplement any of the Benedictions by personal supplications relevant to the subject of each particular Benediction, he may do so. So also said R. Hiyya b. Ashi in the name of Rab: Even though it has been said . . . still if one has a sick person at home, he may offer an extempore prayer at the Benediction for the Sick; or if he is in want of sustenance, he may offer a special prayer in connection with the Benediction for Prosperous Years.

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The passage exhibits, obviously, the contributions of many centuries. Let us begin with R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. Our immediate interest lies not in what divides them, but in what they hold in common. Both agree that personal petitions have no place in the statutory *shemoneh esreh*; these are to be excluded not only from the more generalized opening and closing sections, but even from the "middle" petitionary Benedictions.⁵ It is doubtful that the inviolability of a fixed text deterred these two Sages from allowing the insertion of the petitions of the individual. Without entering into this very complex area in liturgical history, one can repeat the following instructive incident:⁶

Once a certain disciple went down before the Ark in the presence of R. Eliezer, and he span out the prayer to great length. His disciples said to him: Master, how long-winded this fellow is! He replied to them: Is he drawing it out any more than our master Moses, of whom it is written: 'The forty days and the forty nights that I fell down'?

Rather, it was the character of the Prayer that resisted the insertion of the petitions of individuals.

The Prayer is, at the least, a petition for the community, and an acknowledgement of God who continually meets the needs of the community.⁷ The petition of the individual is irrelevant to the former, and disrupts the latter. Thus, the *amidah*—even in its mundane petitionary section—is devoted to the needs of the community, and the individual is expected to enter fully into the universal setting—so fully, perhaps, that he transcends his own pressing needs. Or, less psychologically, the *amidah* may represent the claim of *knesseth Israel* upon God (as its opening and closing sections clearly do), and the individual is therefore an illicit and impotent unit. If R. Eliezer allows expansion of the Prayer (as the story above would indicate) and even demands creativity within it (one Talmudic explanation of his raillery against "he who makes his prayer a fixed task" is that a man "should put something new into his prayer"⁸), this can refer only to prayer on behalf of the community,⁹ or in praise of God.

The Sages and Nahum the Mede (who flourished both before and after the destruction of the Temple) go along with this

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scheme in all Benedictions except the last of the petitionary section. Here, where God is called upon to answer all prayers, no prayer can be excluded; here the community is seen not only in its generality, but also in its particularity. Perhaps the Sages and Nahum recalled the prayer of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement: the last of his Benedictions was a prayer for the acceptance of "the other prayers, petitions, and requests, that Your people Israel require through Your salvation."¹⁰

There does exist one piece of Tannaitic evidence pointing to the acceptance of the view of the Sages. We read of the inhabitants of Nineveh, who asked R. Juda the Prince: "What about such as us? We need rain even in the period of Tammuz. Do we pray as individuals, or as a community? If as individuals, we pray for rain in the Benediction 'Who hearest prayers'; if as a community, in the Benediction for a prosperous year . . ."¹¹ The question assumes that individuals could petition God for their immediate needs in the *amidah*, rather than before or after it.

At the same time, it is quite clear that the individual could not make his petition at any other place in the prayer. This is the sense of the debate between the Sages and Nahum, on the one hand, and R. Eliezer and R. Joshua on the other. Samuel reiterated the opinion of the Sages and doubtless emphasized both the license of their ruling and its limitations. His contemporary, Rab, however, declared to the contrary:

Even though it was said that one should pray for his private needs at "Who heareth prayer," nevertheless if he is disposed to supplement any of the Benedictions by personal supplications . . . he may do so.

Or,

If one has a sick person at home, he may offer an extempore prayer at the Benediction for the sick; or if he is in want of sustenance, he may offer a special prayer in connection with the Benediction for Prosperous Years.

Rab indicates, by his very citation of the ruling of the Sages, that he does not see himself as rejecting their statement, but only

interpreting it. The details of this exegesis are somewhat unclear; perhaps he understood the main thrust of the Sages' dictum to be directed against R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, while by allowing petition in "Who hearest prayer" they in effect opened the entire petitionary section to individual requests.¹² This, too, might be the intention of Abaye, who cites Nahum as normative, but need not necessarily reject thereby the flexibility of Rab.

But whatever the intention of Rab may have been, we know from the incident of the Ninevites and R. Judah the Patriarch that the statement of the Sages was read (in the generation preceding Rab or even contemporary with him!) narrowly: the petition of the individual, as distinct from that of the community, was disallowed in any Benediction other than "Who hearest prayer." If this is the case, Rab represents a marked shift in both practice and theory. He opens the *shemoneh esreh* (or at least its major segment) to the needs of the individual and to his requests; indeed, the fixed text of the petitionary Benedictions could conceivably become, in the hands of the prayerful soul, a suggestive guide to petition, a minimal service.¹³ From a theoretical point of view, he breaks down the impenetrable barrier between the needs of the community and the needs of the individual: one is perhaps the miniature of the other, but is not qualitatively different. (I may be going a bit too far here; prayer on behalf of the community, is, after all, built into the very formulae and topics of the *amidah*.)

The subsequent history of this problem is not too visible. The medieval scholars sided with Rab. The practice of immediately succeeding generations is harder to detect. Rab Judah was pupil of both Rab and Samuel; in *Abodah Zarah* he reported in the name of Samuel supporting the Sages, while elsewhere¹⁴ we read of his statement (given in some manuscripts as a report in the name of Rab)¹⁵ that:

A man should never petition for his requirements either in the first three benedictions or in the last three, *but in the middle ones* (italics mine).

The comment of Abaye is, as we noted above, ambiguous. Other statements are ambiguous as well.¹⁶ Yet it is surely relevant that

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the allowance of individual petition in the *shemoneh esreh* did not displace the practice of adding a section of imploration and petition (*tahnunim*) to the Prayer, *after* its conclusion. These petitions—a classic collection of which is given in *Berakhot* 16b—are phrased in the plural, but often betray their meaning in the life of their author. Some are, in addition, openly personal. It would be unwise to read this structure as a rejection of the opinion of Rab (though it may derive, historically, from the prior practice): Rab himself is the author of one such habitual petition. Rather, we see here a kind of “spiritual reticence,” or better, a form of religious modesty (*zeni’ut*), which prevents the authentic Jewish prayer from pressing his individual petition constantly and centrally upon God. Hence, the selection of the time after the completion of the *amidah* for the *tahnunim*. On the other hand, the desire of the individual to address himself as an individual to God is also more effectively developed by his choosing to stand alone to devise his own structure rather than integrating his personal sentiments into the form that already exists.

NOTES

1. The central text here is *Sifre*, Deut., sec. 41. It ought to be noted, however, that there exists a contrasting “priestly” exegesis to Deut. 11:13: See the comment of R. Eliezer ben Jacob, *ad loc.* (end) and, *Abot de R. Nathan*, Version A, chap. 4, “on the Temple Service” (trans. J. Goldin, p. 32).

2. *Berakhot* 26b.

3. R. Zedehiah Ha-Rofe, *Shibbaley Ha-Leket, Inyan Tefillah*, sec. 17 (ed. Buber, p. 16).

4. I have used the Soncino translation, though its rendering is arguable in places. I have altered its rendering of the *dicta* of Rab and Samuel—these were indefensible.

5. Both medievals and moderns have discussed the interpretation of the statement of R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. Do they refer to personal petitions that stand outside the *shemoneh esreh*, or do they refer to the petitions of the *amidah* itself? I follow the former alternative, which represents the reading of Rashi. For the latter, see *Pardes Ha-Gadol*, sec. 173. For modern discussion, see L. Ginzberg, *Perushim Ve-Hiddushim Bi-Yerushalmi*, III, 356-360; Y. Gilat, *Mishnato shel R. Eliezer*, pp. 84-86.

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6. *Berakhot* 34a.

7. A recent stimulating discussion of this theme is offered in M. Kadushin, *Worship and Ethics*, pp. 97-120; cf. esp. p. 120, where *A.Z.* 7b-8a is discussed.

8. M. *Berakhot* 4:4 and *Babli* and *Yerushalmi ad loc.* R. Joseph Ashkenazi (16th cen.) first suggested that R. Eliezer stood in opposition to the sages in 4:3, and opposed a fixed formula for individual prayer. Subsequently this interpretation became quite popular, partly due to its tendentious implications. Recent scholarship has tended to be more conservative: see S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshuta*, I, 31-33, and especially I. Heinemann, *Bar-Ilan Annual*, III, (Heb.), 9ff. On the other hand, see Gilat *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

9. I believe this is the meaning of the somewhat cryptic comments of Ra'abad, *Perush Le-Abodah Zarah*, *ad loc.* The problem merits independent analysis. Cf. also Lieberman, *op. cit.*

10. M. *Yomah* 7:1; *Yomah* 44b.

11. *Ta'anit* 14b. (The relevance of this incident to the discussion in *A. Z.* is noted by R. Akiba Eiger, *ad locum*, and by the standard commentaries to *Ta'anit*). Though the text in our printed editions includes some glossarial material (see the ms. cited by *Dikduke Soferim*, *ad loc.*, and *Tosafot s.v. shalah*), the heart of the question and answer are already present in the original text. *P. Ta'anit* 1:1 has a different version of both question and answer, one that would not necessarily support the generalization we elicit from the Babylonian text, though R. Jose understands the Palestinian version to be consonant with the Babylonian. Interestingly, *PT* cites R. Huna (probably the student of Rab) that the individual makes his requests in *shome'ah tefillah*.

12. Compare E. E. Uhrbach, cited in Gilat, *op. cit.*, p. 86, n. 9.

13. Cf. the material cited in n. 16, below.

14. *Berakhot* 34a.

15. Cf. *Dikduke Soferim*, *ad loc.*

16. It is tempting to cite the subsequent comment of R. Joshua b. Levi as opposing Rab: "Though they said . . . if a person wishes to say (petitions) after his prayer, he may lengthen them till they are as long as the order of prayers on the Day of Atonement." Here, prayers are added only *after* the *amidah*. But this is a dangerous temptation. First of all, this same statement is cited *in the name of Rab*, in *Berakhot* 31a. Secondly, the text in *A.Z.* is uncertain — cf. *She'iltot*, *Vayakhel* 66. Finally, its interpretation is unsure — cf. A. Weiss, *Le-Cheker Ha-Talmud*, p. 82, n. 145a; and S. Lieberman, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.