

sonality and charged with values.

There are many of course, who will claim that such a drastic change of focus is a distortion of "Judaism." And they will cite history to show that while aberrations have existed, only the mainstream of text study has endured. Since I do not subscribe to the view that truth necessarily wins out in history, I find this meaningless. A religion that strives to be eternally changing and prophetic demands a greater outlay of creative energy than one that sees itself as eternal. The existence of a vibrant, flexible religion is constantly threatened by the dullness of men's imaginations, while the mainstream has survived because of that same quality. Perhaps a papal-like irrelevancy is the price that is paid for coasting too long in any mainstream.

#### INTERESTED STUDENTS

The editors of *RESPONSE* are in the process of enlarging the editorial board for the coming year. We are seeking undergraduates who are interested in exploring the relation between Judaism and contemporary concerns and in engaging in an ongoing critique of Jewish communal institutions. We ask of our associates three functions: to comment critically on manuscripts in areas of their interest, to distribute the magazine on their campuses and in their communities, and to seek material for publication, both contributions and ideas for articles. Interested students should contact *RESPONSE*, 160 West 106th Street, Room 3-C, New York, N.Y. 10025.

# New Metaphors: Jewish Prayer and Our Situation

by Alan L. Mintz

*Mr. Mintz submits Jewish prayer to an analysis of form and function by asking what the experience of prayer should yield. Religious language — that of the Siddur — must reflect our everyday realities in order to accomplish what prayer might do.*

It is a very tenuous assumption that anyone still wants to talk about prayer. Is it on anyone's list of concerns? Does anyone really care? In reality, unless we have to defend prayer to students or non-Jews, we let the subject drop and be swept under the carpet. It has ceased being even problematical. In opposition to this trend, this article makes the claim that although the subject is enormously difficult and the solving of its problems remote, prayer is still worth considering even if our efforts are only "experiments in thought." To initiate critical exploration of prayer by complaining and lambasting would be self-indulgent in addition to echoing what we already know. Discussing prayer has to be a *tabula rasa* affair; we have to disregard boring formulas, uninviting communal associations and adolescent prejudices in order to be ready to ask the question "what should prayer be, do, yield?" In order to engage in useful analysis rather than exhortatory sermons, we have to take the onus upon ourselves and project a desired model. Then might we compare it with the actuality of Jewish prayer and its expression in the *siddur*.

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"Prayer is the process of re-integration, the existential recovery of self."

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#### I

Among the three tasks we would ascribe to prayer, one would be *personal integration*. Much has been made of the fact that technological society tends to divide life into specialties which are constantly decreasing in scope.

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For those of us who are not yet out in the world, we do not understand this observation in terms of careers and professions, but more urgently as regarding the compartmentalization of our lives. Neither the village nor the shtetl function any longer as a totally encompassing institution or as a community which makes provisions for all our needs and interests. That kind of cultural totalism is —for better or for worse— irrevocably lost and has consequently been replaced by a swarm of sub-cultures and institutions, each competing for our involvement and emotional investment. We depend on college, an activist project, a school of Jewish studies, a summer camp, a synagogue, our roommates, and perhaps the RESPONSE community each for the fulfillment of different needs. As a natural result of such fragmentation, we play different roles in addressing the members of each community: sharp intellectual, cool activist, defender of the faith, accessible model to younger kids, tender lover and so on and so forth. Being not one person but twenty takes its toll on our inner life, and we quickly lose any sense of identity, integrity or self.

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“Wonder is the motivation and prayer the quest. To pray is to re-awaken to that which is more than the everyday, to become an explorer into the interconnectedness of things.”

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Recovering lost unities is more than difficult, but prayer stands the anguished attempt at re-integration, the painful, groping process of trying to recover one's self. There is no quick restoration, no easy reconstruction; we look, instead, for re-adjusted equalibria and new alignments. After trying to identify the nature and variety of our masks, we struggle to pull these disparate elements into some new order. We wrestle to hold contradictions in tension, rediscover priorities and dismiss cheapening involvements. In those wished for, but infrequent moments when we know “something has happened,” we feel the chaos of competing roles yielding to the realization of pattern and configuration. Prayer as the poetic act of unifying opposites: the worshiper as poet.

Second, prayer should yield access to the experiencing of *mystery* and *transcendence*. To explicate these terms is difficult but, we might think of mystery as recovering a sense of life as poetry, of everyday happenings as cadences in a larger, less pedestrian rhythm. Indeed, we can only describe transcendence negatively, that is in terms of something different in kind than our ordinary arrangements. Among everyday events there are moments when we discern islands of meaningfulness and pockets of ultimacy which point beyond themselves. Reality (or divinity, if you will) is then imagined as a network of relationships so complexly and subtly interconnected, that we must regard it as ultimately mysterious because we cannot fix and categorize it. Our response becomes a dialectic of wonder: the more we know, the more we are amazed.

Our culture and environment have radically altered, and we have been denied the natural world as a primary object of wonder. Even though nature has been banished from the urban imagination, there are other more significant events and relationships in our world through which we catch glimpses of a more ultimate field of meaning. Indeed, it is the ever-astonishing depths and transformations of the interpersonal relation which provide a continuously expanding horizon for the realm of mystery. As relationships both deepen and change, we must go searching continually for the elusive contours of reality. Wonder is the motivation and prayer the quest. To pray is to re-awaken to that which is more than the everyday, to become an explorer into the interconnectedness of things. We reach upwards in order to come down to a more livable ground of action.

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“Prayer is an apparatus for moral reassessment and re-commitment”

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Finally, the moral component in prayer is the *awareness of sin*. Despite unwanted christological associations, sin means falling short of a goal and implies a sense of incompleteness, dissatisfaction and unfulfillment. In our self-assured notions of radical politics and progressive education, we often avert our eyes from our moral insensitivity and capacity for evil. Guilt is the inevitable result of the awareness of wrong-doing. Prayer is not the safety valve which cathartically lessens this anxiety when it becomes too painful, but an apparatus for moral re-assessment and re-commitment. The worshiper first confronts a list of concerns (in the anthropomorphic system, a catalogue of completed symbolic actions performed by God) and, by force of comparison, realizes his own inadequacy in various areas. The other step in the process is the re-alignment of self, the inevitable re-commitment to values that results from a consciousness of sin acquired during the existential assertion of meaning i.e. prayer. Prayer stands pivotally between relativism and absolutism in offering man a list of concerns to be addressed but without dictating ultimate decisions or personal priorities.

To step back for a few moments, it is not difficult to see that integration, transcendence and sin are categories mysterious unto themselves and repel inroads attempted by discursive language. We certainly possess no knowledge of tools sophisticated and sensitive enough to approach directly such shadowy and elusive provinces. Since we cannot depend on naked, descriptive language (perhaps Kaplan's mistake), we turn instead toward language and its symbolic scaffolding, metaphor. (Non-verbal modes —drugs and gesture— will be touched on later.) In the thought of Ian T. Ramsey, the religious phrase performs two tasks. First, it renders some aspect of mystery intelligible by picturing it in a model familiar to us (e.g. a cloth of the naked), and second, it should evoke and generate within us further

personal disclosures into the nature of the cosmos.

This fragile duality of function is presented in a slightly varied way in a saying by Jacob Boehme, the German mystic.

For according to the outward man, we are in this world, and according to the inward man, we are in the inward world... Since then we are generated out of both worlds, we speak in two languages, and we must be understood also in two languages.

In prayer, the verbal symbol mediates between our inner and outer lives. Metaphor objectifies our inner life and lends structure and pattern to our internal chaos of motives. Our snarled subjective state is temporarily embodied in a symbol so that it can emerge from underground — unsuppressed though structured — into the world of outward expression, if only for a moment. The obverse function of the metaphor is to image, however partially, that outer world, to represent the flux of those shared assumptions about the present and shared hopes for the future we call reality. The best metaphor, then, is one which yields an insight into the world and also lets us plug into it from our personal lives.

But these are very awesome powers we ascribe to the word: to be so pivotal, to evoke so much! Buber's retelling of a Hasidic saying echoes this force.

You should utter words as though heaven were opened within them and as though you did not put the word into your mouth but as though you entered into the word.

What makes the word capable of sustaining such total investment and engagement? The quality the metaphor must possess called "empirical fit" (Ramsey). The symbol must reflect our empirical situation, represent the universe that we know in part, refer to our outer and inner realities. It must speak to us, evoke our world of discourse, and let us plug into it. If the empirical fit is not made, the symbol over-extends itself, calcifies and becomes a dysfunctional liturgical fossil.

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Prayer is the poetic act of unifying opposites: the poet as worshipper.

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## II

Discussing the function of religious language provides a natural transition from sketching a paradigm to dealing with the actualities of Jewish prayer as we know it. Our liturgy goes one step further and offers us a full-blown metaphorical system: anthropomorphism. Many models hypothetically could have been chosen, especially the Cartesian one clothed in the garments of the new science, e.g. the inner working of reality represented by sine curves and quantum mechanics. But since we have said that the proper locus of mystery is the interpersonal relation, it is understandable

that the system should organize itself around personality as the only model suitably delicate to represent the nuances of the human condition.

The *siddur*, consequently, is the display of the divine personality, the catalogue of divine epithets as objects of praise and blessing. God is imagined as the clother of the naked, the sustainer of life, the redeemer, the all merciful, and so on; the composite or summation of all these roles constitutes a super-personality which — as a model — approaches the divine mystery. Once we overcome our pretensions of being able to penetrate directly the eyes of mystery and thus begin to understand the function of anthropomorphism, it need not put us off. If the worshiper can become genuinely engaged in the metaphors, he will realize, at the same moment he affirms the model, which of its aspects he has disregarded in his life-action and how he might re-create himself accordingly.

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What we know as the *siddur* is a disarray of high-church pieties: salvation, redemption, lovingkindness, God as Saviour and Deliverer.

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The apparatus is certainly ingenious, but one might well ask whether the particular language of the *siddur* has the power to engage the worshiper to turn him on even if he is so disposed. To better formulate the question: to what extent is this model empirically fitted to what is familiar and urgent to us? Certainly as regards our interest in social activism we cannot complain, viz. the second blessing of the *amidah*: sustaining life, extending mercy, raising the bowed down, curing the sick, freeing the imprisoned, keeping promises, etc. But when we come in search of reflections of our passion for relationships of sexual love and non-sexual concern and for the dialectic of cultural revolution which so indelibly marks our world, we are disappointed to find only the father-king paradigm. Either the reflections are not there, or they are too obfuscated by impenetrable and sterile language (or perhaps the protestant understanding of the original which is so much a part of our received Jewish culture). Also the tone of the prayer book troubles us. We hear an assertion of meaning so unequivocal and self-assured that we find little in common with the tenuous, doubting nature of our existence today. If the liturgical enterprise is to be taken seriously, immediate transfusions of new metaphors are needed, ones sympathetic to our temperament. We might even refurbish and appropriate symbols from the non-rabbinic periods of our culture, e.g. the barely explored riches of kabbalistic literature. Perhaps we shall yet talk of God as a tender lover or an ever-constant companion.

*The word as reflection and provocation; so much depends on the word!*

The language that remains has to be re-understood thoroughly, for what we know now as the *siddur* is a disarray of high-church pieties: salva-

tion, redemption, lovingkindness, God as Saviour and Deliverer. Only within the scope of utter re-interpretation can we re-approach religious language, a process of re-understanding that would have to be cognizant of cultural revolution and modern temperament. I think we might be surprised to discover radical meanings of the words, in the sense of uncovering their original import and charisma. Some experiments in re-understanding as examples:

*hesed* (lovingkindness): endowing another person with a sense of dignity and beauty.

*shalom* (peace): minimizing conflict among people by respecting their defense mechanisms.

*ge'ulah* (redemption): redemption from depression by a life-restoring event such as falling in love.

In any case, barren literalism is the enemy. In order for the word to function, we must let it hover within a numbus of meaning, different levels of which can be plugged into by the worshiper according to need. After the fashion of Norman O. Brown, we must weaken boundaries of meaning within the word and between the word and our minds. We must be reborn into a symbolic consciousness and inhabit it with courage so that when we utter a word such as *ge'ulah*, we may refer to an event at once historical (the Six Day War) and personal (marriage or death).

### III

Even if all these things were done and evocative words really found, we still might wonder whether our consciousness could be made sufficiently non-literal to turn on to words. The revolution we have undergone in technology and communication has had an effect more permeating than any of us would like to admit. We now wander in a brave new world of discursive language where words are either deceitful as in advertising or radically unambiguous as in science. One dimensionality has set in: symbol reduced to sign. If we do not wish to roll with the tide, two measures commend themselves immediately. On the one hand, we must initiate our minds — or more realistically, those of our children — into the modes of metaphorical thinking: immersion in poetry. On the other, we must put religious poets to work fashioning words which are both genuinely engaging and true to our felt reality.

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Will re-educating the religious imagination prove so difficult that we shall have to leave the word in search of other modes of symbolic expression? The answer, of course, is unclear at this time. Any other means would,

however, have to fulfill the threefold function we outlined at the beginning. The drug high, as astonishingly documented by Itzik Lodzer in these pages (Winter, 1968), can be used as a vehicle for experiencing transcendence and for responsible religious experimentation. Although it yields quick access to spirituality, we would have to require that such experimentation be related to — perhaps even for the sake of — everyday experience, or "down holiness" as Burt Jacobson calls it. At some point, a moral referent must be present before we can label it *Jewish* prayer. In any case, the rebirth of the senses and the search for the high in many quarters suggests a shared ground of feeling fertile to the growth of prayer.

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The techniques of non-verbal communication and self-expression developed at the Eislen Institute and at other laboratory settings in the country hold out other possible new directions for Jewish prayer. The new interest in T-groups with their focus on interpersonal honesty and concern indicate still another path. If prayer is to regain any stature as a community phenomenon, perhaps such groups will be instrumental in providing a communal setting which, for a change, will be a positive factor. Congregational worship and camp services seem inhospitable, and more and more we shall be looking toward small groups of highly motivated religious experimenters who might peel off layers of inhibition and "sing to God a new song."