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The way most of us pray today is very different from the way prayer was originally intended. I share the opinion that what goes on in most Jewish “houses of prayer” of whatever community, denomination, sect, or form, is usually far from an exciting, uplifting spiritual experience. And if one compares what our prayer books require of us nowadays, especially over the Holy Days, to the bare bones of Amram Gaon’s Siddur, the *Mahzor Vitry*, Rambam’s *Seder Tefillot* or the Abudraham, one wonders what happened and why.

Here is what Maimonides says in his “Laws of Prayer” Chapter 1.1:

1. It is a positive command to pray every day, as it says, “You will serve the Lord your God.” By tradition they learnt that this service is prayer, as it says, “to serve Him with all your hearts.” The rabbis said “What kind of service involves the heart? It is prayer.” There are no rules about this in the Torah nor is anything fixed about it in the Torah…

2. This obligation is that everyone should appeal to God every day and pray and praise the Holy One. Then one might ask God to address his personal needs.

It remains a Torah obligation to relate to the Almighty through personal, private prayer every day, regardless of what may or may not happen in a synagogue. This, I suggest, rarely happens.

It was with exile, Maimonides goes on to say, that the Jews lost the language, the means and the habits of personal prayer. During the Babylonian and Persian exiles, Ezra the Scribe introduced texts to the community to facilitate Jews’ obligation to pray as a sort of optional menu. Psalms (55:18) mentions the idea of praying three times a day, and in the book of Daniel (6:11), Daniel himself describes praying three times a day toward Jerusalem. In his case, he prayed privately in his loft. The *Bet haKnesset*, the community center and the *Bet haMidrash*, the house of study, may have developed in exile too. Without doubt, these institutions were developed during the Pharisaic era. But it was not until after the destruction of the temple that formal, communal prayer was officially instituted to replace the two daily “permanent” communal sacrifices, the *Temidim* of *Shaharit* and *Minha*. Controversially, as the Talmud records, (TB *Berakhot* 4b et al) *Maariv* was added first as an option, and only under Rabban Gamliel did it become an obligation. The text of what we now call the *Amidah* was fixed by the rabbis of Yavneh (with some later modifications) as the Talmud says: “Shimon Hapikuli laid out the order of prayer before Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh” (TB *Berakhot* 28b). The Talmud suggests that the prophets had initially done this but their innovations had been forgotten (TB *Megillah* 18a). With the destruction of the Temple, the study house became the central institution in Jewish life and continuity, and it tended to be conflated or merged with the House of Prayer.

I rehearse this well-known narrative because it is clear that there has always been in Judaism a dichotomy between personal, private prayer on the one hand and public, communal prayer on the other. Their functions are entirely different. Not everyone agrees with Maimonides, but if I understand his position correctly, the Torah ideal remains in force that individuals have an obligation to find very subjective and personal ways of connecting with, communicating with, or at the very least appreciating the magnitude of the divine presence in this world. Such an activity should include contemplation, meditation, and exercises in what is called "*deveykut*," actually engaging with God. This can rarely be done in a crowded synagogue surrounded by other humans who often have no interest in such activity. It cannot be done while a Cantor performs, and most of all, it cannot be done "on demand." I will concede that sometimes for moment, such as *Kol Nidrei*, such an effect can be achieved. But it rarely survives the initial phase except in very few situations such as those yeshivot with a strong tradition of prayer or a rebbe's court. For the average Jew living in no such rarified situation, synagogues in general simply do not offer this experience of the divine.

I wonder if they were designed to. The Great Synagogue in Alexandria, where flags were waved to let distant parts of the building know when to say "Amen" (TB *Sukkah* 21b) cannot possibly been a place of personal engagement with Heaven. The services we have nowadays perform very different functions. They primarily function give us a sense of community and to actually get people together in ways that most religious obligations do not. Judaism makes demands on us both as individuals and as members of the community of Israel. Personal prayer remained personal. Yet over time, personal prayers and petitions were incorporated into the "prayer" format, as a matter of convenience. To reinforce the sense of community, it was insisted that prayer with a quorum would be more effective than without.

Jewish prayer was dramatically affected by the Medieval experience. Herded into claustrophobic, foul ghettos under Christianity and Islam, most Jews wanted to escape the overcrowded hovels they often shared with animals. The synagogue was the only large and airy building in the community. They also needed to come and go and to stay together for safety. That was where they wanted to be and spend as much time as possible. No wonder the services got longer and longer.

The prevailing culture was also one in which any and every educated person expressed him or herself in poetry. Hence the great *payyatanim* who spread under Islam from Israel to Spain to Northern Europe and churned out religious poetry in formal structures and conventions that were incorporated into services. But it was not without a heated debate between those who wanted more within the services and those who wanted less. And in parts of northern Italy, music was added to the services. Before Shabbat, quartets often helped create the peaceful reflective mood.

Then came the explosion of mystical Judaism. The great mystic R. Yitzhak Luria was responsible for introducing songs, for walking out into the fields, for praying on the hills of Safed. The attempt to experience God moved from human-made structures to nature and back. The existential aspect of prayer, its singing and ecstasy as much as its communal aspect, influenced the great Hassidic reformation. But then, like all revolutions, began to lose its iconoclasm and creativity and sank back into formality. Still to this day in many Hassidic courts you will hear singing and ecstatic prayer that would be unimaginable in most synagogues in the West.

And there is another dichotomy in the evolution of prayer we often overlook. Is it prayer or study that brings us closer to God? You can see this issue emerging in the debates in the Talmud, too (TB *Berakhot* 8a and 30b). The Study House was the essential communal building. Was it the influence of both Christianity and Islam, with their emphasis on the Church and the Mosque that affected the way Judaism evolved?

I recall most vividly the seminal experience of my youth, Be'er Yaakov yeshiva in 1958. The brilliant Rosh Yeshiva Rav Shapiro *z"l*, a contemporary of my father's at Mir and from the Brisk family, was the archetypal Lithuanian. Nothing brought him closer to Heaven than the mental concentration on Talmud Torah. He, like my later influence Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz *z"l* of Mir, manifestly tore himself away with great reluctance from his study when the academy broke for prayers. You could sense the desire to finish the obligation as quickly as possible. Rav Volbe, the Mashgiach, also from Mir, was altogether of different nature. Prayer for him was to stand in the presence of the Almighty and to lose oneself in another world. It was compelling to see his concentration and physical transformation when he prayed. It was yeshiva prayer in Be'er Yaakov that had a greater impact on my spiritual life than any other single event or encounter. It was so different to anything I had ever experienced in any other kind of prayer building or room, not even the great atmosphere of Mir in Jerusalem on the *Yamim Noraim*. In Be'er Yaakov, in one *Beis haMidrash*, in one small institution, a person could witness two contrasting models of Jewish prayer. It is true to say that the students divided pretty evenly in the examples on which they modeled themselves.

For many years I was a pulpit rabbi in large Orthodox synagogues, where most of those present came for social reasons and for whom the synagogue service was a form of entertainment; the rabbi preaching, the hazzan singing. Prayer was burdensome. Most did not understand the words or the meaning. Personal devotion was an afterthought. Talking throughout the service in both men and women's sections meant that even if one wanted to pray it was almost impossible to concentrate. I was reminded of this problem recently in the impressive Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in Manhattan on a Friday night when I wanted to absorb the atmosphere and enjoy the liturgy. But two gentlemen sitting in the back row talked continuously and loudly right through what was a very short service that I just ended up feeling angry and frustrated. No one, it seemed, dared to approach them or try to shut them up.

Often big synagogues are packed on occasions such a bar mitzvah or Shabbat hattan, when the social side completely takes over. Many visitors have no idea what is going on or how to behave. The boredom is exaggerated by dragging out the honors and extending the service for hours. No wonder taking an unofficial break for a shot of whisky is the only way many people can get through it all. But even in a synagogue packed with apparently religious people, there is total disregard for the black-and-white laws of the *Shulhan Arukh* and its commentators on the need for silence, space, and consideration during prayer. No wonder it is so hard to encounter the Almighty in a synagogue. That is why the yeshiva world looks down with scorn on what it calls "*ba'al haBayyit* davening."

An alternative and increasingly popular model that goes back to Eastern Europe is the *shtiebel*, literally "little room." The first ones I encountered were off the marketplace in Mea Shearim. At almost every hour of the day or night, you could walk in to any one of a honeycomb of little rooms. As soon as there was a *minyan*, someone would start and you simply said everything that had to be said without ceremony, in a businesslike atmosphere. You would be in and out in a quarter of the time that you would in similar service in a big synagogue. I found it much more satisfying because it was informal. And if I wanted to meditate or have a chat with the Almighty, I made sure I found some private time and space during the course of the day. This model is essentially one of simply fulfilling an obligation. Of course, it an important aspect of halakhic behavior. But for more and more people, the routine performance is not enough. It meets one kind of need but not another more passionate kind of religious experience.

Then there is the educational challenge of prayer. When I was the Headmaster of a Jewish residential school for students mainly of non-Orthodox backgrounds, we used to have modified traditional services that cut out the "optional extras." So a structure developed that was based on the essential elements of the biblical obligation to recite *Kri'at Shema* and its attendant blessings, the rabbinical prayer, the *Amidah* and *Kri'at haTorah* on Mondays Thursdays and festive days. It was short, conducted mainly by the pupils with familiar popular tunes and active participation. I cannot claim it won over many pupils. But I do know that most looked back with nostalgia at is beauty and simplicity when they left and encountered more conventional services.

I recall, again in my Headmaster days, being faced by the usual complaints that the obligatory morning services were boring. I urged pupils to be creative. I asked them come up with a different way of spending the first half hour of each day in some spiritual activity of a specifically Jewish character if they found the traditional services boring. But that took effort and hard work. Invariably they started enthusiastically, but soon gave up and asked to return to the old, well-established ways. Tradition has its uses but feeling comfortable with it requires serious effort, as indeed does mastering any different process or language.

Over the years I have gone through all sorts of different experiences. I have had my Shlomo Carlebach-Happy Clappy phase. But I grew out of it. I spent years praying in various Hassidic courts. Some prayed slow and some very fast so as, it was claimed, not lose concentration. I certainly never entered a large synagogue if I could possibly avoid it. I enjoy *hazzanut*, but not during prayer time and certainly not when it drags out the service. And most sermons bore me.

I currently pray mainly in a small Persian community. I am often asked how different it is. The variations in the text are minor. The main superstructure is the same and easily recognizable. The sounds are different but that is a matter of upbringing and cultural preference. The problems, however, are the same. Does one go to synagogue to pray and study or to chat? Do I as a rabbi have to spend my time like a Headmaster calling for order? Or do I have the right to switch off and pray regardless of what is going on around me?

Whatever my preferences, I have always encountered other Jews who disagreed with me. Some preferred the big performance, the big event, the sense of being together, to the modest utilitarian alternatives I tried to recommend. Yet it is right that it should be so. We are not all alike. We have different intellects and tastes and needs. There should be alternatives.

In my professional role I always recall the famous talmudic story of Rabbi Akivah. When he was conducting services he was the first to finish so as not to inconvenience the congregation. But when he prayed alone he was left long after everyone had departed still standing amongst the pillars of the hall in deep prayer (TB *Berakhot* 31a). At the same time I wonder why, if the weight of talmudic opinion was in favor of abbreviated prayers such as "*Havinneynu*" (TB *Berakhot* 29a), nowadays is it almost anathema? It seems we are too concerned with conformity and not enough with living a truly spiritual life.

For all my criticism I believe we are living in exciting times. More and more people are willing to experiment. Whereas once this inevitably meant casting off the requirements of tradition, now the trend is to find resolutions within tradition without throwing the baby out with bathwater. One of the joys of many Jewish communities where there is a critical mass is that one can on *shul*-crawl a Shabbat and experience a wide range of alternatives—and possibly find one that accords with one's temperament and background. Of course this may lead to a kind of parasitism in which we neglect our obligations to support communal institutions. But if we discharge our obligations to community, there is no reason why we should not choose to pray where we feel comfortable.

I would argue that so long as the essential halakhic elements remain in place, it is an obligation to try to find new ways of making the service stimulating, inspiring, and attractive. I also believe that more energy should go into trying to find completely new styles of worship rather than tinker with existing ones. That would mean giving people more choices. I would suggest that there must be creative ways in which female spirituality could create totally new atmospheres and experiences without being constricted by established male modes and norms. Many big synagogues have already begun to act as holding companies offering different styles of services under one roof.

Regardless of the style of service, or the regularity of one's attendance, one must, I believe, reestablish the practice of personal prayer outside of synagogual structures. Meditation and contemplation in a totally secular style, or one borrowed from another religion, have brought relief and inspiration to many in the West. But we, too, have our exercises and meditations. One need look no further than Avraham Abulafia to realize they have been part, albeit a neglected part, of our heritage for a thousand years. We must revive them.

Leo Baeckin a volume of essays entitled *Judaism and Christianity*, contrasts Christianity as a romantic religion with Judaism as a classical religion. The romantic relies on the experience, the stimulation of beautiful buildings, music, canonicals, and ceremonial to induce a sense of devotion, worship, and spirituality. The classicist works on himself to make it happen. Many of us have become too much influenced by an alien culture that we seek to emulate, one in which we expect to be stimulated religiously from outside of ourselves. In fact the Jewish way is to make things happen rather than expect others to do it for us. This applies regardless of where one goes to pray in public or alone. C.S. Lewis says in his *Screwtape Letters* that the quickest way to divert someone away from religious experience is to get then to focus on what is going on around them.