Three Different Triggers for Kavvanah

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It isn't easy to pray from the heart every day. It isn't easy to teach about it either. As for a great many things, the hardest thing is often to decide how to start. What is the very best "trigger" to use at the outset, to engage other people in meaningful study?

When I began to teach "Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer" (*kavvanah*) almost 30 years ago, I found a powerful trigger that proved effective over and over again. I used it many times in the past to initiate study, and sometimes I still do today. But in more recent years I shifted to a different trigger at the very beginning. Now I use the older trigger later on in the course of study.

The switch derives in part from a change in the audience over the past few decades, and in part from a change in the order of study. Both parts are related, because the change in the audience motivated a change in the sequence. Yet it seems to me that the newer trigger and order of study might have been best for the original audience, too. Finally, and most recently, the coronavirus pandemic forced synagogues to shut and millions of Jews to suddenly change how they pray. This turned out to be yet a third trigger for discussing *kavvanah*. In this paper I will describe these three triggers one by one.

The First Trigger: *Kavvanah* as an Obligation to God

The first trigger is a story:

A friend of mine was hired by a successful corporation. He was thrilled about his new job, not only because it was lucrative, but also because his new boss had a reputation for being fair and easy to work with. The boss was also known to cultivate warm, friendly relationships with his employees.

Not long after my friend began working, his boss told him that he'd like to get to know him better and meet his family. So my friend invited the boss to his home for dinner with his family the very next week. As soon as he came home that night, he asked his wife and children to help get things ready for the big visit. They all made plans together to shop and cook and clean up the house. Each of his kids had a special job to do: One was to mow the lawn, another to vacuum, and another to clean out the garage. Everything had to be perfect when the boss arrived for dinner.

But when the big night arrived, my friend decided to leave everything to his wife and children. He himself drove off to spend the evening at a basketball game! When the boss arrived, my friend's wife had no good way to explain why her husband wasn't home. The boss was furious (despite the wonderful dinner that was ready to be served) and fired the man on the spot in his own home, right in front of his family.

The most embarrassing thing about the story above is that it isn't really about a friend of mine. It's about me. It is also about pretty much every Jew, male or female, young or old, Sephardic or Ashkenazic, who has ever attempted to say the daily prayers found in the *siddur* with regularity. It was first written down as a parable in Spain nearly 1,000 years ago by Rabbenu Ba?ya ibn Pakuda in his classic *Duties of the Heart*:[1]

> When one prays with his tongue, but his heart is distracted by matters other than prayer, his prayer will be like a body without a soul, or an empty shell, because his body is present but his mind is absent when he prays. Of those like him the verse says: "Inasmuch as this people approached with its mouth, and with its lips honored Me, but kept its heart far from Me, and their reverence for Me was a commandment of men learned by rote…" (Isaiah 29:13).
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> This has been compared to a servant whose master was his guest. He charged his wife and the members of his household to serve the master and attend to all his needs, while he left to occupy himself with pleasures and games. He didn't serve his master personally, and he didn't strive to honor him and do what was proper for him. The master was angry with him and refused his honors and service. He threw everything back in his face.
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> Likewise for one who prays while his heart and mind are devoid of the matter of prayer: God will not accept the prayer of his limbs nor the movement of his tongue. You can see this from what we say at the end of our prayers: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing before You, O Lord, my Stronghold and my Redeemer" (Psalms 19:15). But when a man occupies himself with any matter in the world, whether it is permitted or forbidden, and afterward he finishes his prayer and says "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing before You," is it not a great disgrace that he claims to have spoken to his God with his heart and his mind when his heart was not with him, and then he asks God to accept it from him with pleasure? He is like those of whom it was said, "As a nation that pretends to show righteousness…" (Isaiah 58:2).

According to the parable above, the "master of the house" within each of us is the mind, and when we pray it sets tasks for the other parts of the body: It tells the eyes to scan the text of the *siddur*, the tongue and lips to pronounce the words, the spine to hold us up straight for the *Amidah* (the silent standing prayer) and bend when it is time to bow. It tells our hands to hold the *siddur* and our feet step

back and forth three times before and after the *Amidah*. Although I don't do it myself, many others find that swaying ("shuckling") helps them concentrate better during prayer: For these people their hips are also involved in the action when they pray. All these parts of the body do the tasks they are given by the mind during prayer, and sometimes they do their jobs well. But if one's conscious mind is absent when one prays, occupied instead with business, friends, or a basketball game, then neither the words of one's mouth nor the other movements of one's body have any value to God.

This trigger provokes serious discussion because it makes a very firm demand. That demand is made in personal terms, as a moral obligation toward God. But it is also clearly binding on a halakhic level: All the codes of Jewish law have always required *kavvanah* for prayer. The personal demand and the formal requirement coincide, but it is the former that gives rise to the latter. Rabbenu Ba?ya's *Duties of the Heart* is a pietistic work, and Jewish pietism has ever refused to admit a distinction between ritual and morality as separate realms.[2] For Rabbenu Ba?ya, the "religious" order and the "social" order are one and the same, because God is a personality and a relationship with God can be understood (at least partially) in human terms. No human being could fail to be insulted in the face of such behavior, and the very same is true of God.

Yet the discussion of Rabbenu Ba?ya's parable can sometimes get heated precisely because the obligation is halakhic as well. The parable makes sense on an interpersonal level precisely because we don't recite fixed texts to other people three times a day! Since our conversation with other people is extemporaneous and unique—as opposed to being fixed and highly repetitive—it is indeed insulting to talk to a person without paying any attention to what you are saying. But how can the same thing be said of prayer? Isn't the very demand both unfair and impossible?

It is with this question that a serious discussion of *kavvanah* really begins. It gets right to the crux of the problem at the very heart of halakhic prayer: Should one pray to God when *kavvanah* is unlikely or impossible? Is that really what the halakha demands? It turns out that according to talmudic rules that were accepted by all of the great authorities, at least in principle, one simply must not. Rabbenu Ba?ya himself accepted these rules in practice, not just in principle, and that lets us understand his parable anew in an entirely different light: His demand to pray with *kavvanah* is neither unfair nor impossible, because when *kavvanah* is not forthcoming one simply does not pray.[3] To be clear: It is not just that prayer isn't obligatory when *kavvanah* isn't forthcoming, but that it is forbidden. Maimonides ruled the very same way almost two centuries after Rabbenu Ba?ya, also in practice and not just in theory.[4] Even according to those who said that these rules are no longer practical, *kavvanah* is still required and the obligation of prayer is not met without it.[5]

The advantage of Rabbenu Ba?ya's parable as a trigger for discussing *kavvanah* is that it goes straight to the heart of prayer and *kavvanah* as obligations. That makes it highly effective with observant Jews who are committed to the halakha as binding. But there are millions of Jews today who don't share that commitment. How can the topic be taught to them?

The Second Trigger: "Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"

Teaching prayer to groups of Israelis from the entire spectrum of observance required a different trigger. I still use Rabbenu Ba?ya's parable for prayer without *kavvanah* with these groups, and we still study prayer as an obligation. Indeed, to study Jewish prayer without that idea would be to misrepresent it. But in more recent years, instead of starting right away with that trigger and its related topic, I begin with something else.

The second trigger is a short prayer about prayer called *O?ilah la-El*. It is sung by the prayer leader (*shali'a? ?ibbur*) on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the Sephardic tradition it is said before the prayer leader's repetition of the *Amidah* for *Musaf*, and in the Ashkenazic tradition it is said before the special blessing of the holidays (within the repetition). Here are its words:

I firmly hope in God and plead with Him,

I ask Him to grant me the gift of expression,

That I may sing His praise among people,

And express His deeds in song.

A person has an inner world,

But the gift of expression comes from the Lord.[6]

Lord, open up my lips, and let my mouth declare Your praise![7]

To be sure, I don't give my students this prayer as a text right away. First we listen to it sung in the tender yet stirring melody composed by Rabbi Hillel Peli, which has become quite popular in Israel and is widely used in synagogues.[8]

After listening, when we focus on its meaning, one sentence always stands out: "A person has an inner world, but the gift of expression comes from the Lord." There is a contrast here between that which is shared and that which is special. Every person has an "inner world" and that is what makes him or her a human being. It is, of course, a blessing just to be, to exist, but that is a blessing shared by everyone alive. It is "the gift of expression" that is special, i.e. the ability to express one's inner world in a way that means something to another person. This blessing is not shared equally by all.

Some of us express ourselves better than others. Even those who have some share in this blessing find that there are certain times or situations when they don't find the right words from the heart that can enter the heart of another. One of the greatest tragedies in life is when we want to share our inner world with someone else, but cannot express it. Most poignant of all is when we want to create a connection or deepen a bond to another person, but we don't know how to do it. It is then that we need to ask God for "the gift of expression." And if it is God with whom we want a connection, then we pray: "Lord, open up my lips, and let my mouth declare Your praise!"

As for Rabbenu Ba?ya above, the idea here is human. The gift of expression is perhaps the most precious quality that a human being can possess. It is needed in each and every interpersonal context, whether the other personality is God or a human being. Here, too, the artificial boundary between the "religious" realm and the "social" or "moral" realm blessedly collapses. This allows for discussion of prayer and its meaning for Jews across the entire spectrum of observance. I now think that even for observant Jews—those who are committed to halakha and obligatory prayer—this is where study of prayer should begin. With this trigger the very soul of prayer itself comes first, before discussing prayer as an obligation and the difficulties that it causes for *kavvanah*. At the same time it still puts *kavvanah* in the center of things, where it belongs, right at the start.

Furthermore, the fact that this prayer is said by the prayer leader (*shali'a? ?ibbur*) brings home other aspects of Jewish prayer in a way that can be meaningful to all. First of all, “the gift of expression” is a blessing not just for individuals, but for groups. How might a class in a school, as a group, approach a teacher or a principal? How might the employees in a company approach their senior manager? How might a community approach a governor or a president? They need to choose a representative to speak for them, because if they all spoke at once then they wouldn’t be speaking as one. The most important quality for such a representative will certainly be “the gift of expression,” and if he cares deeply about his mission then he might see fit to pray for that. That is exactly what *O?ilah la-El* means for the prayer leader.

Finally, there is the matter of the fixed prayers as found in the prayer book. Is prayer really about talking to God in a way that requires “the gift of expression”? How can it be, if the prayer book already tells you what to say? What need is there for the prayer leader to ask for “the gift of expression” if he already knows what to say?

The prayer *O?ilah la-El* implies that there is some degree of novel expression in what the prayer leader says to God, not just in tunes or intonations but in the very words themselves. While halakhic prayer is certainly structured, it was not meant to be fully fixed; there is a rich middle ground between reading a text that appears on a page and total improvisation.[9] This also touches upon the idea that halakhic prayer is public in essence, and that is why it must have a good deal of structure. But even private speech between individuals has more structure than it might seem, and part of “the gift of expression” lies in the ability to use inherited forms in new ways to touch the heart of the listener.[10]

A large part of what makes *kavvanah* so difficult derives from the built-in tension between personal sincerity and a structured public framework. That tension is suddenly eased when public prayer is not an option. This recently happened during the coronavirus pandemic, and it led to renewed focus on *kavvanah*.

The Third Trigger: Sudden Closure of Synagogues

An extraordinary situation can sometimes call our attention to ordinary things that we tend to overlook.

The pandemic forced sudden, radical change upon observant Jews who are accustomed to praying with a *minyan* (quorum of ten). Many of these people are denizens of the *yeshivot* or *yeshivah* graduates. Others are classic “*minyan*-goers,” people who often make strenuous efforts to work community prayer into their busy lives every single day. On the fringes of the group that received this sudden shock are those Jews who usually only pray with a *minyan* on *Shabbat* and holidays, along with the *kaddish*-sayers. But the shock was the most severe for people who seek out a *minyan* every single day.

It is hard to predict the results of a sudden shock. To put its severity into perspective, this wasn’t just a jarring personal change in the lives of current *minyan*-goers. Rather, it is the first time since the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem that the daily public worship of God was suddenly silenced in the vast majority of synagogues around the world. In medieval Ashkenaz, the “holy congregation” and its public worship were thought to be the direct continuation of the Temple service, upon which the world stands.[11] That sentiment echoes to this very day in the many Ashkenazic communities that still contain the Hebrew abbreviation *k”k* (“*kahal kadosh*,” or “holy congregation”) in their names. But recently, the public worship of the nation that stands before God

came to a sudden halt. In the long term, this may prove to be a deeper wound than the personal shock to people's routines.

When it comes to individuals, a jarring event can sometimes bring change, even if that change is not immediately visible. But sometimes there is no real change and old habits quickly return. It is quite likely that prayer with a *minyan* will resume in its usual form once the current emergency ends. For most of the devoted people who try never to miss prayer with a *minyan*, the current crisis will remain a vivid memory, but not one that changed their lives. Many people, whether they are daily *minyan*-goers or not, may learn to cherish community prayer more deeply in the wake of recent events, and it is possible that synagogue attendance may even be strengthened. No virtual environment can fully replace the experience of a community where people meet regularly in person.

It is also possible that this shocking interruption to the age-old institution of community prayer will cause long-term harm that weakens future participation, or that there will be no change at all. One cannot presently know. It is quite possible that the result depends on our response.

It is tempting to measure strength or weakness in terms of attendance and participation, and to think about the possible effect of the pandemic on future synagogue life in those terms. But perhaps, if there is to be any long term change as a result of this crisis, it might better be in the quality of community prayer.

The pace of a *minyan* is far too fast for sincere speech (and certainly for "the gift of expression"), but that speed is a necessary function of the overwhelming amount of text that is said. At the very same time the demand for sincere speech is clear and uncompromising in the sources, and to pray without it is clearly called a transgression. This is a problem that cannot be resolved, it seems, unless prayer with a *minyan* becomes impossible due to an unforeseen crisis. Then we must pray at home, which suddenly makes sincere speech possible.

To pray publicly, with a *minyan*, is thought to be a sign of piety today, just as it has been for a great many centuries. At the very same time to pray with *kavvanah* is also an aspect of piety (an even greater one than prayer with a *minyan* according to the halakhic sources). But on a practical level, for so many people, these two related kinds of piety can be mutually exclusive!

It is not just that it is difficult to pray with *kavvanah* in a *minyan*. It is not just that it is a tremendous challenge. The real problem is that it can be impossible. It is simply a practical issue: The 100+ pages of a weekday *Sha?arit*, recited in full in the synagogue, make sincerity impossible for a great many people. There are of course ways for the individual pray-sayer to abridge what he or she says. But someone who does so removes oneself from what is going on at the very same time in public: That person isn't really praying with the community for most of *Sha?arit*. The speed-reading game goes on simultaneously, but that is a losing game according to Rabbenu Ba?ya and the halakhic codes. If that person is asked to be the prayer leader, such a person will need to play that losing game or else decline. The competition between public prayer and sincere prayer can be a zero sum game.

One might object that this is an age-old problem. We are told, after all, that it "was the custom of Rabbi Akiva, when he would pray with the congregation he would shorten his prayer and go up, so as to avoid being an encumbrance on the public. But when he prayed by himself, if a person would leave him in one corner he would find him [later still praying] in another corner. And why all of this? Because of his many bows and prostrations" (*Berakhot* 31a).

At first glance, this passage seems to reflect the same kind of tension we find today. In his great enthusiasm, Rabbi Akiva often extended his prayers, but not when he prayed with the community. Rabbi Akiva's personal spirituality is praised in this passage, but the needs of the public come first.

Note, however, that the passage talks about Rabbi Akiva “shortening” his prayer in public or “extending” it privately. The prayer that is probably meant here is no more and no less than the *Amidah* (the Eighteen Blessings), probably along with personal supplications (*ta?anunim*) that are appropriate at its end. The person who witnessed Rabbi Akiva could not have imagined a daily *Sha?arit* of 100+ printed pages in his wildest dreams (or nightmares). If Rabbi Akiva’s extended *Amidah* was “an encumbrance on the public,” then what are we to say of our order of public prayer today?

It is also important to point out that for ?azal, the question of “more” or “less” has little to do with *kavvanah* (*Berakhot* 5b, 17a). When the Talmud tells us that Rabbi Akiva “would shorten his prayer” in public, it doesn’t mean that he would pray without *kavvanah*. It rather means that his *kavvanah* was appropriate to a public setting.

In short, our condition today is the exact reverse of what the Talmud describes: It is the daily prayer of the community that encumbers the individual because of its excessive length and quantity and speed, not the individual who encumbers public prayer by taking longer.

Finally, Rabbi Akiva’s “short” public *Amidah* and his “long” private one probably had nothing to do with reading fast or slow. It is more likely that he was using his own words within the overall framework of the prayer. Sometimes he said more to God and sometimes he said less. In public he said less, so as not to encumber the community.

By forcing people to pray at home, alone or with their families, the coronavirus pandemic laid bare the conflict at the very heart of our daily community prayers. Never before was there a trigger for *kavvanah* that affected so many people directly and all at once. We would do well, when our daily *minyanim* resume, to find ways to make them far less encumbering and much more conducive to *kavvanah*, for individuals and communities alike.

[1] Eighth Treatise on Examining the Soul, chapter 3 (#9).

[2] I have borrowed the language of Haym Soloveitchik here; see “Three Themes in the *Sefer ?asidim* ,” *AJS Review* 1 (1976), pp. 311–357 (at p. 321).

[3] Immediately following the text cited above, Rabbenu Ba?ya adds: “And our sages said: "A person must always take stock of himself. If he is capable of directing his heart, then he must pray. But if not, then he must not pray" (*Berakhot* 30b).

[4] *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Love, Laws of Prayer and the Priestly Blessing 4:15.

[5] See *Shul?an Arukh, Ora? ?ayyim* 98 and 101. For a full discussion of these issues, see chapters 1 and 2 of my *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997); available in full online at Internet Archive < https://archive.org/details/Kavvana_Directing_the_Heart_in_Jewish_Prayer_1997_Seth_Kadish_final-images>.

[6] Proverbs 16:1.

[7] Psalms 51:17.

[8] A simple search in YouTube for the Hebrew title “Ochila lakel” leads to numerous recordings based on Rabbi Peli’s tune, as well as other more traditional melodies that were brought to Israel from the entire Jewish diaspora.

[9] See my essay “Each River and its Channel: Halakhic Attitudes Toward Liturgy,” which appeared at the Torah Musings blog (October 30, 2011) and may be found at this link: < https://www.torahmusings.com/2011/10/each-river-and-its-channel-halakhic-attitudes-toward-liturgy/ >; the discussion in the comments is also valuable. A solid study of the topic may be found in Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998). I also wrote about it in chapters 8–11 of *Kavvana*, but those chapters need corrections and updates.

[10] This reality finds expression in biblical prayer and even in rabbinic prayer; see Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, which may be found online at this link: < https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft8b69p1w7;brand=ucpress>.

[11] On this community ethos, see Jeffrey Woolf, *The Fabric of Religious Life in Medieval Ashkenaz* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).