

Reversing the Garment: On Language and Ritual in Jewish Prayer

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ANYONE WITH EXPERIENCE OF TRADITIONAL JEWISH PRAYER INTUITIVELY SENSES THE RELATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND RITUAL AS SOMETHING SO INTERFUSED THAT IT IS, INDEED, AN IDENTITY. NOT JUST that our rituals are a language, as the structural anthropologists would tell us; but also that language is itself a ritual. Its operation in prayer is performance of a physical sort, and each constellation of words has its unique musculature and pathway. Each progression through the trajectory of prayer is a journey with syllables for bends and turns, with rhythms and cadences for waves of motion and inertia, with ideas and idea rhymes for its errands and goals, and with a textual weave as the land in which it travels.

One who lives with the text daily knows this intuitively and, I think, physically. Some know it, as well, through the concordance and the lexicon, through acquaintance with Bible and midrash, and through the imprint these make upon a life and on the life of a community. This is another way of noting the close interrelation of prayer and lore. Prayer, in other words, is continually nourished and replenished by study. And whereas the motions of study predispose us toward a kind of deconstruction of the tradition—the taking-apart of a text, the experimental tinkering with traditions and themes, the give-and-take of discussion, the trying-on

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of ideas for size, and so forth—prayer is a kind of reconstruction. Things that have lain strewn about this way and that in the learning phase fall strangely into harmony and coherence in the praying phase. If in confronting the tradition we find it displayed as a kind of garment turned inside-out, prayer is the reversion of that garment to its ordered state. To borrow a metaphor from theater, if study of Torah is a kind of step-by-step familiarization with the script, prayer is the performance.

What we know, then, is brought to life by being performed, by being recited, by being *davened*. Curious that this word is so untranslatable, but one who knows davening needs no definition of it. Might the word come, as some suggest, from a root related to the English “divine?” Is prayer divine substance, too? Was it thus for the early hasidic master who said: “Know that every word of prayer is like a living being, and for one who does not put full concentration into prayer it is like a creature with a missing limb”? Was it thus for Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav who held that the words and letters of prayer plead with the worshipper to tarry? “Stay with me, and me alone!” they cry as one passes through them, speeding through as in a careening car.

None of the ideas I’m suggesting here is easy. Prayer defies any definition not rooted in the stream of life. But there is also a kind of intellectual tradition to Jewish prayer, one that is the sum total of all texts of prayer, of poetic worship, and of its commentary and philosophy.

In working on translations for the new Reconstructionist siddur, my own approach came out of one such text in particular, Joseph Gikatilla’s *Sha’arei Orah*, a thirteenth-century kabbalistic manual that emerged from the same circle of theosophic kabbalists whose ideas reigned in the Zohar. Gikatilla structured his ten chapters according to the ten divine emanations, and so each chapter is devoted to the key words—from Bible, priestly ritual, rabbinic lore, synagogue *piyyut* (liturgical poem), and medieval philosophy and pietism—that are associated with a given divine emanation.

The key words in Gikatilla’s work (summarized at the end of this article) form a hierarchy of divine names and attributes. And though it purports to be an anatomy of God, it is also an anatomy of our tradition.

Gikatilla’s system unfolds the shape of our tradition in a radical-

ly different way from that in which Jews usually encounter it. It is different, for example, from the historical order of biblical events, or from the arrangement of books and their commentaries, or from the relation of topics in halakhah, or from a theological schema of tenets and doctrines, or from a philosophical progression of ideas and propositions, or even, for that matter, from the verbal and thematic progression of prayer. It is, in its own terms, a Tree of Life, a complex organism whose tissues are woven on names, and whose every part is simultaneous with every other. So, at any rate, says Gikatilla near the end of his Introduction:

Know that all the holy names mentioned in the Torah are dependent on the four-letter name, YHWH...the four-letter name is like the body of a tree, while the name Ehyeh ("I-AM!") is the root of the tree, from which more roots spread and branches reach out on all sides. All other holy names are like the branches and leaves that spread from the body of the tree, and each of the branches bears its own fruit. And apart from the holy names that are well-known and which may not be erased, there are many designations derived from each name. All these designations have branches of their own, and together they make up the rest of the words of the Torah. You thus arrive at the realization that the entire Torah is woven together out of designations [for God], and the designations out of names, and the holy names are all dependent on the name YHWH and all are united in it."

This in theory formed the ground-plan of our prayer-book translation. I say "in theory," because the plan was never realized in its full detail, or according to its full capabilities. And this restraint, too, as I'll try to suggest, is part of the reality of prayer. At first, I found such restraint exasperatingly inimical to my work as a translator—to paraphrase retired Presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan, I continually found words of poetry being replaced by words of clunky policy. As time went on, I began to find that words of clunky policy could themselves be reshaped into poetry, and that, in any case, even my defeats on policy grounds had a certain poetic logic of their own.

In Gikatilla's system are assembled many different species of talk, the discourse of many incommensurable systems—figures of the most ancient biblical poetry, names of pre-Israelite deities and worship-sites;

figures of historical narrative; of proverb, psalm, and wisdom; of the Israelite cult and the Jerusalem Temple; of alphabet and language lore; of philosophical negatives and ultimates; of the life of nature and the human body; of the household and the conjugal relation; of waking life and dream life; of this world and the World to Come. In these senses do we possess an anatomy of our own tradition. Mordechai Kaplan's "Judaism as an evolving religious civilization" is written into the kabbalist's map of God. Each generation's input, its forms of talk, its folkways and rituals, its apprehension of the divine, changes the shape of the whole.

Some of this process, I submit, was reborn in the committee stages of the work, when we tussled over divine epithets, and, indeed, over the very principle of variability, and it is very likely a tussle that will not end with our work. An excess of variability in divine names, I came to see, was at least as much of a problem as the monotony of a uniform equivalent. And the more poetic and primitive the epithet, the more grating it was likely to be to contemporary sensibilities. In this way do our silences and hesitations, our lacunae, our retreats into euphemism, our reserve, become a part of the texture of prayer.

So, for example, "Rider of the Clouds" bit the dust, as it were; so did "The Tent of Meeting," "The Wine," "The Moon," "The Darkness," "Lebanon," "The Thought," "The Gathering of the Waters," "Field of Apples," "Zion's Mount," "Serpent," "The Tree of Life," "The Fog," "The Table," "Fear of Isaac," "Red Man," "The Supernal Linen Vestment," and even "The Shekhinah." In our late and much diminished historical hour, the vessels are not strong enough to contain the light, and so our words for God are tamer and more familiar, a pale afterglow, perhaps, of that primordial Torah of key words that forms the basis of Gikatilla's system. We are more comfortable with venerable abstractions like "The Ineffable," "The Eternal," and "The Omnipresent;" verbal nouns like "The Creator," "The Redeemer," and "Giver of the Torah;" adjectives like "The Merciful," "The Good," "The Faithful," "The Compassionate." Even so, we have a wealth of names, and, it must be said, they've served us well. Here and there, I hope I may be forgiven for having smuggled in a more poetic turn that may survive—if it survives—because it works well in context: "The Fount of Life," "The One Who Is," "The Wanderer," "The One of Sinai," "The Oasis," "The Consuming Fire," and "The Lamp."

One way or another, our rehearsal of these names and attributes is the ritual of language that brings our prayer alive. But the frozen text we activate must be savored for what it is: a snapshot in the life-history of a religious movement, a juncture in tradition-formation, the imprint of a particular synergy of Jews at a particular moment in Jewish history. I confess to being fascinated by that synergy, faulty as it may be, as a precious thing, Jewishly speaking. I feel that contained therein is the seed of a marvelous piece of philosophical knowledge, which has incalculable value as Torah. But I don't presume to know what it means. To me, it is a rune, hermetic and impenetrable, and we who profess a theology of immanence need not be uncomfortable with this apparent reign of the accidental and the arbitrary. It is our first route to knowledge of ourselves and of our world. What sustains me in this labor on the language of prayer is the conviction that I am continually learning new things about human nature, And so, under the best of circumstances, I recover my own humanity in the process.

A few words, now, on behalf of an old friend: the English language. It should not, properly speaking, be the main thing on exhibit in a translation. *Leshon targum* (the language of translation) performs its role well in being invisible, in being a silent and obedient vessel of the Water of Life, the Hebrew tongue—in being, in some way, superfluous. The task of a good translation, after all, is to carry you back to the original, to draw your attention to what is in the source, without drawing attention to itself. In the utopian language of revelation, the primacy of the holy tongue—understood as the primordial tongue of the universe—leaves no room for any other tongue born of the addling of Babel. Ancestors of today's Jews have spoken Hittite, Hurrian, Egyptian, Aramaic, Persian, Greek and Arabic. A late-medieval Spanish called Ladino. Judeo-German, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, and Crimean Turkic. And, as history has conspired, Jews speak English. Can that ever be much more than simply what it is—another language of the Jews that for a time will have its day, and mostly disappear?

But we Jews must not sell short the tongues of *golus* (exile). To a theology of immanence, the relative, the historical, and the transitory have a special claim, and we English-speaking Jews have an unavoidable indebtedness to the language of Caedmon and Aelfric, of Chaucer and Wyatt, of

Shakespeare and Donne, of Blake, and Joyce, and Nadine Gordimer. We do not, alas, do much to keep it in its proper working order. We have mostly sacrificed, or swallowed, or eroded, the archaic features of the tongue, including the wondrous vainglory of grammatic cases we are on the verge of losing. For example, “whom,” whose accusative “m” has counterparts in Latin, Greek, Lithuanian, Gothic, and Sanskrit, has not survived television and journalism. Then again, are Jews obliged to preserve the elegance of elevated English from those eras when all Jews were barred from England? Is a Jew a mere two generations removed from *mameloshn* (mother tongue) still beholden to a thousand years of English?

And which cadences of English, prithee? The quantitative and alliterative rolls of Anglo-Saxon, heavy, hurling, heeling hounds of heathen heft? Or the iambic of the actor's English at The Globe—spoken most trippingly upon the tongue, even at moments of high passion? Or is it sump'm tossed around by cabbies in da Bronx, or something totally-major-I-mean-really-really-super-uncool? Which English do we speak? We speak them all. And if we're made to speak a few we haven't spoken for a while except in someone else's racial memory, the effort may not be in vain. Nor will it necessarily seem unnatural or forced, provided the translator has approached the task correctly, with an ear to context and to common sense.

The Hebrew of the siddur, of course, is similarly no single tongue. The singer at the Sea, the psalmist, the prophet, the Chronicler, the Mishnah, and the Hekhalot, the journeyers of the Merkavah, the anagrams of ibn Gabirol and Halevi, and the gnostically saturated figures of *Yedid Nefesh* and *Lecha Dodi*—why should the English used to render these be any less complex than the original? And so we approach the New World mother tongue with some affection and respect. It, too, is part of who we are, regardless of when or where it was we climbed aboard and found the shelter of its wing.

In some sense, this is the message of every translator concerning the language of translation, a plea not to forget the ephemeral. Babel, too, is a creation of God, and even though it bears a certain panic of estrangement and bifurcation, it is wedded to the language of the Source as the fire to the coal, the Tree of Knowledge to the Tree of Life. According to Reb Nachman, the language of Targum, tongue of the seventy nations, burns with the fires of lust and alien service. But it is our flesh, our clothing. And, at times, it's all we have. Through its mediation, we approach the holy.

SELECTED NAMES AND WORDS
ASSOCIATED WITH THE TEN EMANATIONS

I

"I will be" (Ehyeh)
Crown (Keter)
Source of Will (Mekor ha-Ratzon)
The Great Aleph (Aleph Gedolah)
Acts of Lovingkindness (Hasadim Tovim)
Fountain of Mercy (Eyn ha-Rahamim)
Humility (Anavah)
Holy Ancient One (Attika Kaddisha)
The Elder's Hair (Se'arot ha-Zaken)
The Simple Nun (Nun Peshuta)
The Hook of the Yod of the [Divine]
Name

II

Yah
Substance/There-is (Yesh)
Wisdom (Hokhmah)
Deep Thought (Omek ha-Mahshavah)
Deep Exaltation (Omek Rum)
The First Yod of the [Divine] Name (Yod
Rishonah shel Shem)
Eden
Father (Abba)
Mysteries of Wisdom (Ta'alumot
Hokhmah)

III

YHWH
Understanding (Binah)
Return (Teshuvah)
Supernal Justice (Tzedik Elyon)
Breadths of the River (Rehovot ha-Nahar)
The First H of the [Divine] Name (Heh)
Rishonah shel Shem)
Red Onyx Marble/Merchantess (Soheret)
Who? (Mi)

IV

Deity (El)
Abraham's Love (Hesed Avraham)
Right Side (Yamin)
Holy (Kadosh)
Supernal Waters (Mayim Elyonim)
Eternal Love (Hesed Olam)
Arm (Zro'a)
Lion (Aryeh)
Son (Ben)

V

God (Elohim)
Mightiness (Gevurah)
Weak Hand (Yad Kehah)
Attribute of Harsh Judgment (Middat ha-
Din ha-Kasheh)
Merit (Zekhut)
Fear of Isaac (Pahad Yitzhak)
The Great Fire (ha-Esh ha-Gedolah)
Gold (Zahav)
Bread (Lehem)
Salt (Melah)
Serpent (Nahash)
Wine (Yayin)
Bee/Deborah (Devorah)
Red Man (Admoni)
Vav of the [Divine] Name (Vav shel
Shem)
Horn Blast (Teru'ah)

VI

YHWH
Center Line (Kav ha-Emtza'i)
Tree of Life (Etz ha-Hayyim)
Truth (Emet)
Beauty (Tiferet)
Knowledge (Da'at)
The Middle Bar (ha-Bariah ha-Tikhon)

Exalted (Addir)
Peace (Shalom)
Smooth Man (Ish Tam)
Mercy (Rahamim)
Memory (Zekher) or Male (Zakhar)
Moses (Moshe)
Milk (Halav)
Honey (Devash)
I (Anokhi)
The Good One Who Sees Me (Tov Ro'i)
The Head Phylacteries (Tefillin shel Rosh)
Spinal Cord (Hut ha-Shidrah)
Simple Ram's Horn (Shofar Peshutah)
Great Sound/Voice (Kol Gadol)

VII•VIII

YHWH of Hosts (YHWH Tzeva'ot)
God of Hosts (Elohim Tzeva'ot)
Essence of Heaven (Etzem ha-Shamayim)
Victories (Netzahim)
Right Foot (Regel Yamin)
Yokeless (Eyn Ol)
Left Foot (Regel Smol)
Testacles (Trey'n Be'in)
Broken Horn Blast (Shevarim)

IX

Living Deity (El Hai)
Living God (Elohim Hayyim)
Foundation (Yesod)
Good (Tov)
Good Intelligence (Sekhel Tov)
Remember! (Zekhor)
Holy Mountain (Har ha-Kodesh)
The Lower Point of the Vav (Katze'ha ha-
Tahton shel Vav)
This (Zeh)
Sabbath (Shabbat)
Covenant (Brit)
Sign of Oath (Ot Shevu'ah)

David's Faithful Acts of Love (Hasdei
David ha-Ne'emanim)
One Who Lives Forever (Hey Olamim)
Mighty One of Jacob (Abbir Ya'akov)
Lower Love (Hesed Tahton)
Covenant of the Rainbow (Brit ha-
Keshet)
The Small Yod (Yod Ketannah)

X

Lord (ADNY)
Well (Be'er)
Sea of Wisdom (Yam ha-Hokhmah)
Cornerstone (Even ha-Roshah)
Sapphire (Even Sappir)
Garden (Gan)
Palace (Hekhal)
Temple (Bet ha-Mikdash)
Divine Presence (Shekhinah)
Avenging Sword of the Covenant (Herev
Nokemet Nekam Brit)

I (Ani)

Gathering of the Waters (Mikveh Mayim)
Dry Land (Yabbashah)
Hand Phylacteries (Tefillin shel Yad)
Bent Nun (Nun Kefufah)
Opening of the Eyes (Petah Enayim)
Tree of Knowledge (Etz ha-Da'at)
Land of the Living (Eretz ha-Hayyim)
Jerusalem (Yerushalayim)
This [f.] (Zot)
Ultimate (Aharit)
"He said" (Vayyo'mer)
Final H of the [Divine] Name (Heh
Aharonah shel Shem)
Bride (Kallah)
Rachel (Rahel)
Blessing (Berakhah)
Eagle (Nesher)
Bathsheba (Bat Sheva)



Tefillat Ha-Geshem

The Prayer for Rain

O God, who covers up the heavens,
 clothing them with clouds,
 who changes seasons by divine decree,
 please open up your bountiful reserves,
 in order to give life to all that breathes.
 You who makes the wind to blow and rain to fall,
 to you all hopes are turned,
 throughout all corners of the earth,
 all human beings and animals,
 all creatures of the earth.
 You who makes the wind to blow
 at measured intervals,
 who sends the waters onto fields and plains,
 please open up your bountiful reserves,
 in order to give life to all that breathes.
 You who makes the wind to blow and rain to fall,
 on the thirsty and the parched, on wastelands feverishly hot,
 send forth your breath,
 let all become a garden moist,
 for human beings and animals,
 grow awestruck with your good.
 Open your hand,
 let all be saturated with your bounty.

*Please open up your bountiful reserves,
 in order to give life to all that breathes.
 You who makes the wind to blow and rain to fall,
 for all the dry ravines,
 abandoned in their nakedness,
 devoid of sprouting grasses, hay, or grains,
 give them their blossoming,
 enclothe them with embroidery of life.
 Please open up your bountiful reserves,
 in order to give life to all that breathes,
 you who makes the wind to blow and rain to fall.*

Our God, our ancients' God:

*With raindrops of Ancient light, illuminate the earth.
 With raindrops of Blessing divine, please bless the earth.
 With raindrops of Gleeful rejoicing, give joy to the earth.
 With raindrops of Divine exultation, enrich the earth.
 With raindrops of Heavenly splendor, give glory to the earth.
 With raindrops of Wise assembly, let the earth be gathered.
 With raindrops of Song and melody, make music through the earth.
 With raindrops of Healing life, enable earth to live.
 With raindrops of Timeless good, give goodness to the earth.
 With raindrops of Your saving help, redeem the earth.
 With raindrops of Caring nurturance, nourish the earth.*

*For you are THE FOUNT OF LIFE, our God, abundant in your
 saving acts, who makes the wind to blow and rain to fall.*

Congregation, then hazzan:

*For blessing, not for curse.
 For living, not for death.
 For plenty, not for scarcity.*

Congregation:

*Amen.
 Amen.
 Amen.*