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Thoughts on Some Shabbat Prayers

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THOUGHTS ON SOME HABBAT PRAYERS

What follows are thoughts about several of the Shabbat and daily prayers which are collected together, with translations, in Shiru Ladonai, a Siddur prepared by Rabbi Aryeh Hirschfield. These thoughts reflect how I understand the prayers, what they mean to me when I am able to make a personal connection with them. Most of the ideas expressed below are not original, but draw from a variety of sources. The format is the following: the Hebrew prayer, or a fragment of it, is followed by an English translation, usually R. Aryeh's but occasionally my own, and then by an interpretation or drash, in italics.

For most of us, there are too many prayers. It is like a long seminar in quantum mechanics that we, middle school students who have studied some biology but not yet any physics, are invited to attend. For the spiritually advanced and for those who are steeped in tradition, the array of prayers of the traditional service may be rich and potent, but for the rest of us, even the prayers of abbreviated services are too many.

A single prayer said with intention, or from a broken heart, or felt with one's body is worth more than a thousand prayers uttered without kavana. If one can say (feel) such a prayer, dayenu. This should be the goal of the prayer service.

Welcoming the Bride: L'cha Dodee (p.5)

שמר וזכור...לקראת שבת לכו ונלכה, כי היא מקור הברכה...סוף
מעשה במחשבה תחלה...קומי צאי מתוך ההפכה. רב לך שבת בעמק
הבכא. והוא יחמול עליך חמלה...התנערי מעפר קומי. לבשי בגדי
תפארתך, עמי...קרבה אל נפשי גאלה...התעוררי התעוררי.

Observe and remember...Let us hasten to go and meet Shabbat, source of blessings...What issues in deed initiates in thought...Go forth from ruin and waste. Long have you dwelt in this desolate place. Upon you the One will bestow compassion...Hope! Rise up from the dust of the earth. Dress yourself in your radiance. Feel the closeness of redemption...Wake yourself up! Wake yourself up!

Shabbat is about being rather than doing, freedom rather than compulsion, wakefulness rather than hypnosis, presence rather than absence. The "desolate place" in which we normally dwell, the "dust of the earth," is the hypnotic compulsion usually associated with our daily activities. What we think of as

acting in the world is really more like being acted upon. Captured by external and internal demands, we live in ruin and waste. But being, freedom, and wakefulness are possible. Though it is very difficult to attain these in any enduring way, if we can experience Shabbat, we dress ourselves up temporarily in the radiance of these qualities. Through this opening, Shabbat can also recur -- however transiently -- in the week. One can sense the possibility of integrating being and doing, and, in this possibility, intimations of redemption.

But first it is necessary to be capable of Shabbat. How is this done? Refraining from engaging in mundane activities can create a space which demonstrates that a "shabbat" -- cessation -- is possible. More deeply, a cessation needs to be made towards external stimuli and internal impulses. Just as we can decline to be consumed by our daily labors, so too can we decline to be totally captured by what we experience from moment to moment. Such a Shabbat, however short, refreshes our soul and lifts us up from the dust. Halacha calls us to this by asking us not only to give up mundane activities on Shabbat but also to give up even thoughts about these activities. To take this as a demand to "observe Shabbat" misses the point. Shabbat will not be appreciated if it is experienced first as obligation. It needs to be experienced first as opportunity.

As the Talmud might ask: to what does this resemble? Consider an automobile transmission, which has two axles each ending in a plate. The plates face one another and if they press against each other, they become coupled, so that when one axle turns, the other turns as well. External life with its incessant demands and the reactions these demands invariably produce in us is this first axle turning. Our inner life, such as it is, is this second plate and axle, and it is mercilessly driven by external influences. More subtly, sensation, to which thoughts and feelings are automatically attached, is the first axle. Consciousness is the second. Because consciousness sticks to and is thus driven by sensation, we have no freedom or wakefulness. But if the clutch is disengaged, the plates become separated, and when the first axle turns the second can remain still. Inner freedom does not come from being disengaged but from having a clutch and using it.

Shabbat is dedicated to the acquisition of the inner capacity to disengage, to the practice of using this capacity, and to the resulting experience of being free, temporarily, from compulsion. Through cessation of doing, we can experience being. We can be grounded in a direct awareness of existence -- of which we are normally oblivious. The intense experience of existing, of being alive, and the connection between this experience and our deepest aspirations is the Shabbat Queen, whose beautiful presence we faintly remember from the past, and whose return we anticipate as we would a lover.

Hama-areev Araveem (p.8)

בחכמה פותח שערים

Your wisdom opens heaven's gates.

Wisdom opens gates. The gates keeping us out of heaven are the gates keeping us in hell. Hell is the prison of our habits and fears and laziness and negativity. Opening the gates of hell opens the gates to heaven.

The Sh'ma (p.9)

שמע ישראל, יי אלהינו, יי אחד

Hear O Israel! The Eternal is our God; The Eternal is One.

Judaism often focuses not on the individual human being, but on the people Israel. But "Israel" is also a metaphor for the multiplicity within every individual. Each of us has many subpersonalities with different concerns and values. We are at the mercy of this multiplicity and have no enduring coherence. One part of this multiplicity promises, but the part called upon to redeem the promise has no feeling for it but instead cares for other things. One part loves; another hates. We are not one. The Sh'ma calls to the multitude in each of us to remember the oneness towards which we can strive. This oneness can make contact with the universal One.

וקשרתם לאות על ידך והיו לטטפת בין עיניך, וכתבתם על מזוזת
ביתך... והיה לכם לציצת, וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את כל מצות יי
ועשיתם אתם

Bind them in t'feeleen on your arm and head and write them in m'zuzot at the entrance to your home ... When you look upon the fringe you will be reminded of all the commandments of the Eternal and you will carry them out.

From the Morning Talit prayer and associated song (p.23):

הנני מתעטף בטלת של ציצת כדי לקים מצות בוראי ככתב בתורה:
ועשו להם ציצת על כנפי בגדיהם

...ותצלם כנשר יעיר כנו אל גוזלו ירחף

Behold I wrap myself in a talit of fringes in order to fulfill the commandment of my creator, as it is written in the Torah: "They shall make fringes on the corners of their garments..."

May the talit protect them as an eagle that stirs up her nest and hovers over her young.

The mitzvot of tfilin, mezuzah, and talit are intended not as ends in themselves but as signs. Their purpose is to wake us up, to remind us to be mindful, to have kavana, to be aware of our existence, so that we might be more conscious and act more consciously. These mitzvot call on us to turn off our autopilot and live in manual, i.e., direct, contact with reality. This is one of the functions of the blessings we are invited to say on many occasions. Blessings are opportunities to stop internally, reminders to come back to oneself and to the world.

Unfortunately, what starts as a reminder quickly ceases to be a reminder and is simply added to a list of obligations. To do these mitzvot as obligations which can be fulfilled even mindlessly completely misses their point.

A mitzva done mechanically is perhaps a "place-holder" for a time when it might be done consciously. Putting on a talit fulfills a commandment. But treating this mitzva as an end in itself defeats its original purpose. This purpose is conveyed by the metaphor of the talit as the wings of an eagle hovering over and protecting her young. How can a talit protect? By wrapping ourselves in a reminder of the effort we need to make. But the reminder needs actually to re-mind. Protection is gained by wakefulness.

□

ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם

[With these reminders] you will not be led astray by the inclination of your heart or by the attraction of your eyes.

If we can notice our inclinations as they arise and feel our capture by external attractions, there is the possibility of not being completely driven by these inclinations and attractions. Only when we are not completely taken over by them is there the possibility of freedom.

...אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים

...Who brought you out of the Land of Egypt.

What does it mean that we were brought out of the land of Egypt? Yet'si'at Mitsraim refers to our first spiritual realization, our first taste of freedom from

inner and outer slavery. We realize that as we normally are we are enslaved, and we are (initially) amazed at the discovery that inner freedom is actually possible. God always speaks as the God who took us out of Egypt, never as the God who created the world, because before we have this realization, we have no God, but after this discovery, we understand that this first liberation, however miraculous and wonderful, is really limited and transient and just the beginning. Torah can be given only to those who have already had a taste of both bondage and freedom. With the memory of the liberation from Egypt, freedom is possible. Without this memory -- unfortunately even with it -- we are again and again back in Egypt.

Mee Hamoha (p.12)

כי פדה יי את יעקב, וגאלו מיד חזק ממנו

The Eternal remembered Jacob and saved him from a hand mightier than he.

Esau is mightier than Jacob. Esau is our animal nature when it rules ego, leaving us no control of impulse, and no awareness of self. Jacob is what is finer in us, which perceives what is higher. Jacob is not passive. He is courageous in his search, prepared even to suffer personal injury to secure its blessings. The Eternal redeems Jacob by liberating him from the mightier hand of Esau.

Amida: Avot (p.14)

ברוך אתה יי אלוהינו ואלהי אבותינו ואמותינו...וזוכר חסדי אבות ואמהות ומביא גואל לבני בניהם למען שמו באהבה.

Blessed are You, our God and the God of our fathers and mothers...You remember the kindness of our ancestors and with love bring redemption to their descendants for the sake of the Divine Name.

This connects to another prayer: חדש ימינו כקדם

Make our days new as they once were.

The phrase "our God and the God of our fathers and mothers" is usually interpreted to mean that we seek not only the God of tradition, of our ancestors, but a God we come to ourselves. We need also to reverse this interpretation. For us, notions of God come heavily laden and stale, but when our ancestors related to

God it was new and vital. In the same way, our first experience of liberation was exhilarating, but our passion has since lost its fervor. We wish and we believe that the merits of our ancestors -- and the merits, i.e., the imperishable residue, of our own past efforts -- will continue to support us. We pray that our present might be as new as those treasured days long past. And the redemption we seek is not merely for ourselves, but for the sake of the Divine Name.

Amida: Gevurot (p. 15)

אתה גבור לעולם יי, מחיה מתים אתה, רב להושיע.
מחיה מתים סומך נופלים ומתיר אסורים ומקים אמונתו לישני עפר...
ונאמן אתה להחיות מתים.

You are mighty in the world, bringing the dead back to life, abundant in saving acts...You revive the dead, support the fallen, free the captive, and sustain the faith of all sleepers in the dust. And you are faithful to your promise to revive the dead.

The dead, the fallen, the captive, the sleeper are not different persons. They are one and the same person, namely each of us. We are the dead. We sleep in the dust. We stumble in the path. We are held captive by our fragmentation, by habit, by weakness of will, by reaction, by absence. But there is hope. It requires our efforts, and if we make these efforts, help comes from "above." With this help, we are brought back to life. We waken after long periods of absence. We are lifted after falling into mindlessness. We are freed from captivity. Even within slumber our faith endures. Because there is a force strong enough to revive even the dead, a force abundant in saving acts.

Amida: K'dushat Hashaym (p. 15)

אתה קדוש ושמך קדוש...

You are holy, Your name is holy...

What is God's name, and why is it holy? God's name is all that is associated in our minds and in tradition with the highest, the source, the ineffable ground, the basis of hope, the good. These ideas, sayings, truths, and prayers are all God's name, but they are not God, which transcends all. God's name is holy because through the Name we come closer to the Reality.

Amida: K'dushat Hayom & Avoda/Sacred Service (p. 16)

וטהר לבנו לעבדך באמת

Purify our hearts that we may serve you in truth.

ותהי לרצון תמיד עבודת ישראל עמך

And may the sacred service of Israel be eternally received in favor.

The Jewish path, i.e., Halacha -- literally not "law" but "walking," i.e., the path to be followed, can also be called the Jewish Work. Western esoteric traditions (traditions not exclusively tied to Christianity) have long referred to themselves as "The Work" or "The Great Work." It is conceivable that this usage derived from Judaism, from the Hebrew term "avoda," literally "work," which is sometimes translated as "sacred service." The word originally referred to the Temple service, but it has a deeper significance. In many ways, the word "avoda" is better than "halacha": the metaphor of "work" is richer than the metaphor of "path." Work is personally done, it is productive; if properly chosen it is meaningful, it is worthy of respect, it has integrity. Work sustains. Its rewards may not come immediately but with persistence they come. But work is not easy. Loving one's neighbor as oneself is work which is extremely difficult. In the Mussar tradition, this avoda is not merely for "self-improvement" or for the benefit of others, but for the sake of Heaven. It is about this psychological-moral-spiritual avoda that tradition speaks for God, saying "Would that they forget me, if only they would walk in my ways."

Avoda must be done in truth, i.e., with sincerity, not for appearances. And though we must constantly make our own individual efforts, they aren't sufficient. Our efforts need external ratification, confirmation, and support. So we pray -- that is, we wish and we affirm our wish -- that we might become able to work in truth and that the universe will receive our efforts in favor.

ברוך אתה יי, המחזיר שכינתו לציון

Blessed are you, Hashem, who returns your presence to Zion.

The land of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple are also expressions for degrees of innerness, for movement towards a holy center in ourselves; to use a different metaphor, for ascent. Zion is the innermost and highest part of ourselves, and we hope that the divine spirit will some day return to this place.

And when the divine spirit returns to this place in each of us, it will return also to the earthly city of Jerusalem.

This relates to another prayer (p. 43):

תבנה חומות ירושלים. בי כך לבד בטחנו...

Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. For in You alone we place our trust...

Our innermost self, that in us closest to God, needs to be sealed off in a certain sense from what can destroy it, but we cannot trust ourselves to build these walls, nor can we trust in the walls...

Amida: Hoda/Thanks (p.18)

ברוך אתה יי, הטוב שמך ולך נאה להודות

Blessed are you, The Gracious One, whose name is good, to whom all thanks are due.

There are many blessings of thanks, and many occasions which evoke gratitude. There is one occasion which is special, for which no blessing has yet been formulated. It is when we wake up from a period of absence, and become again aware -- fleetingly, before the dust quickly shrouds our eyes again -- that we exist. This is a moment of nearness. At this moment, above all others, thanks are due. At this moment, if it is deep enough, thanks spontaneously wells up.

Amida: Concluding Meditation (p.19)

אלוהי, נצור לשוני מרע... ולמקללי נפשי תדום, ונפשי כעפר לכל תהיה. פתח לבי בתורתך, ובמצותיך תרדוף נפשי.

My God, guard my tongue from evil... And to all who would revile me, let my soul be silent and humble as the dust. Open my heart to your Torah that I may eagerly pursue Your mitzvot.

We ask that we be able to endure the unpleasant behavior of others without responding in kind. This may be less than the goal of loving another as ourselves, but it is still a very high achievement. We understand theoretically how this achievement can be reached: we need to make our souls silent and humble as dust. If we can actually do this, we open our hearts to Torah, and if our hearts are

opened our attitude towards mitzvot may change, and we might begin even to eagerly pursue (some of) them. These words are thus practical instructions, and also theory on which practice is based. But all this can start only from a wish. Prayer is an opportunity, an invitation, to wish.

Alaynu (p. 20)

וצונו להיות ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש

Who charged us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Judaism strives for the impossible: an esotericism of an entire people. Everyone, not a "spiritual elite," is called to the sacred. And the call is not only everyone individually but also to everyone collectively, i.e., the social order must also be made holy. The impossibility of this demand leads to the rigidification of the mitzvot: to enable the entire people to participate. This rigidification is both a compromise and a hope. Prayers said at first mindlessly -- and heartlessly -- might later be said with intention and feeling. But as quality declines, quantity increases. A new halacha is embraced to rekindle religious feeling. A new prayer is added to express a nuance of spirit. These too become routinized, and so halachot and prayers accumulate. Nothing is ever relinquished. But the mechanization and proliferation of mitzvot and of prayers has gone too far. Our age requires a different approach. Less mitzvot, less prayer, is more. Quantity is counter-productive. Quality is more important. It would be better for each of us to choose just one mitzva and for a period of time be a "priest" with respect to it. Then we could even ponder the question: what does it mean to be a "priest"? It would be even better, and more effective, if such efforts were undertaken by the whole congregation.

Similarly, it is preferable to bring presence and sincerity to one or a few prayers than to say prescribed words without end while remaining untouched. For those who are God-obsessed, who are capable of sustained kavana, the vastness of the prayer service is a blessing. But for us, the multiplicity of prayers actually distances us further from God. In the excess of words, we never hear the still, small voice (kol dimama daka) inside us. Indeed, we violate the prohibition of taking the name of the Lord in vain when we say prayers while feeling nothing. This commandment is not about vows. It is about something more important, and always timely. It is a demand that we not accept that spirit be deadened.

ביום ההוא יהיה יי אחד ושמו אחד

In that day, God will be one, and God's name will be one.

And in this day, God is not one? Will the oneness of God obtain only in that day, in the future? The Sh'ma calls us to create in ourselves something that is one. This oneness, which is close to God, is at best only faintly present. But however rarely we hear that still small voice, we affirm that "in that day," through our individual and collective efforts, God in each of us, and in all of us, will be one.

Blessing for Torah Study (p.26)

וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה

Blessed are You ... who commands us to immerse ourselves in Torah.

Why is it valuable to say a bracha on beginning Torah study? For most mitzvot, we should use the word "valuable," not "obligatory," because in this era, obligation is for the advanced or those steeped in tradition. We are just beginners, who are alienated by the obligatory, but occasionally seek the valuable. Saying a bracha is valuable because Torah study should be conscious, not routine. While studying Torah we should be aware of doing so, since Torah calls upon us to be aware of every inner and outer action of our lives. It is a contradiction -- and in some respects perhaps even counterproductive-- to study Torah in sleep.

The commandment not to take the name of God in vain requires that we regard Torah study as sanctified, and this means, at least, that we try to sustain some presence within this activity.

Psalm 150 (p. 29)

כל הנשמה תהלל יה

Let all that breathes praise Yah, Hal'luya.

When we are conscious of ourselves as breathing beings, our breath is praise of You. Our inhale says "hallel"; our exhale says "Ya."

Nishmat (p. 29)

ומבלעדיך, אין לנו מלך גואל ומושיע...אין לנו מלך אלה אתה.

Beside You we have no king who liberates and redeems...We have no king except You.

What does it mean to have a king? A king rules us and governs our actions, even our thoughts. What governs our actions and thoughts from moment to moment are actually our attachments, which have enormous power over us. Saying that we have no king except You is a wish, not a reality. In reality we are ruled by many kings, all petty despots, none of whom liberates or redeems, all of whom enslave. What we wish for is to have one king, the only real king, the highest, a king whose worship is liberation and redemption.

To use a different language: these petty tyrants are idols, false gods we worship, turning from one to another from moment to moment in vain hope of satisfaction. What idolatry means is to be caught in attachment to the very limited. The commandment against idolatry is a commandment not to allow ourselves to be governed completely, at any specific moment, by anything less than the whole.

K'dusha (p. 32)

כלם אהובים, כלם ברורים, כלם גבורים, וכלם עושים באימה וביראה
רצון קונם...וכלם מקבלים עליהם על מלכות שמים...

All [the angels] are beloved, all are pure, all are mighty, all are holy, and all perform the will of their Creator with fear and awe...All accept the responsibility of the heavenly realm.

Human beings are midway between angels and beasts. We are all too familiar with our yetser as beast, but there is also a yetser from on high in us, an angel which is beloved and pure and mighty and which accepts the responsibility of Heaven. This angel is in us, and not foreign to us. In rare and brief but precious moments, it even manifests.

קדוש, קדוש, קדוש, יי צבאות, מלא כל הארץ כבודו.

Holy, holy, holy -- Adonai Tz'vaot -- the whole earth is filled with Your glory.

This is not accessible to ordinary experience, but something suggestive of it is accessible. If we awake to ourselves and become aware of our own existence with sufficient simplicity and intensity, all that we turn our eyes towards becomes adorned with the suchness and integrity of being. This is Kavod (glory), or as much as our condition allows us to see, and we are moved to give thanks and praise.

L'ayl Baruh (p. 33)

עשה חדשות...המחדש בטובו בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית...אור
חדש על ציון תאיר

Creating that which is continually new...In your goodness you renew each and every day the work of creation...A new light will illuminate Zion.

Mitsvot must always be new. There is no way to repeat a mitsva done in the past. Efforts must be made fresh, as if they had never been made before. The universe supports us in this; everything is created anew every day, perpetually.

It is not only our individual efforts that must constantly be renewed. The Jewish Work itself -- our Avoda -- must also be renewed to fit every age. As Buber recounts the tale, Rabbi Zusya replied to his student who inquired why R. Zusya did not follow the practice of his own master, "I follow his practice exactly; he did not imitate and I do not imitate." Halacha must be reinvented, rediscovered, in every generation. This does not mean denigrating the inheritance of past generations. This inheritance is a treasure of riches, but the treasure has to be a resource for new beginnings, for us as individuals and as a people.

It is wonderful to hear a prayer which expresses the hope for a new light to illuminate Zion. Not the old light which has faded, which now lights up a corner for only a few of us, but a light bright enough for all, a light which is new, yet still the same as the old. This is our opportunity and our responsibility. Of course, we cannot ourselves actually achieve the creation of this new light. But as is said in Avot: while it is not for us to complete the task, we have no right to abstain from it. And as the Zionists reminded us -- אם תרצו אין זו אגדה -- if you really wish it, it is no fantasy.

Ahava Raba (p. 33)

אהבה רבה אהבתנו.....ויחד לבבנו לאהבה וליראה...כי בשם קדשך
הגדול והנורא בטחנו.....הבוחר בעמו ישראל באהבה

You have loved us with a boundless love.....And unite our hearts in love and fear...In Your great and awesome holy name we trust...Who has chosen the people Israel in love.

The prayer begins and ends speaking of the love God has for Israel, but love is not its only subject. It asks for joining love to fear, and in other prayers we hear much about fear of God, Yir'at Hashem. What does this fear mean? We dismiss notions of heaven and hell and a punishing God as suited only to the unlearned and unsophisticated -- such things cannot be -- yet we detect in these notions a hint of something true and important. What is Yir'at Hashem? Do we feel it? Could we feel it? Do we wish it? We do actually -- occasionally -- have a fear, one normally suppressed, that we will not in our lives make the effort that we need to make, that we will never muster the will to become raised from the dust, that we will never come any closer to God than we are now, that we will live lives ravaged and imprisoned by our real state of being. This is Yir'at Hashem. If we truly face our situation we may even have the greater fear that we will become comfortable in our condition, and forget totally, so that we feel nothing of this at all. There is also an opposite fear in those extremely rare and brief moments when we find ourselves in a higher, unaccustomed, state of being, and feel a terror that we might not be able to get back to our familiar selves, and might be unable to endure this new state if it were permanent. This, too, is Yir'at Hasehm. There is also the fear that we might not be able to accomplish the transition we are attempting, but be caught in the middle, able neither to slumber in illusion nor awake to reality. This also is Yir'at Hashem. All these fears are sacred. But the prayer cannot be said to hint of this. It starts with love and ends with love.

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