

Is Fixed Liturgy Consistent with Heartfelt Prayer?

Rabbi Joshua Cahan, Solomon Schechter School of Westchester

When I ask students to reflect on their experiences in *tefilla*,¹ they tend to end up focusing on one central conflict. They have a notion of what they think a prayer experience is supposed to be like, and feel confused about the fact that the *tefilla* ritual we teach them and in which we expect them to participate seems to have little in common with that notion. Prayer is supposed to be a moment of intense emotion and need, an expression of very personal thoughts. *Tefilla*, by contrast, is long and confusing, in language they may not understand and to which they certainly do not relate. How, they always ask, can our prayers feel personal when they are so repetitive, impersonal, and rote? It has, in their minds, nothing to do with prayer as they understand it.

This is, of course, just an expression of the classic tension between *keva* (fixed ritual) and *kavana* (personal expression) that defines the challenge of making our *tefilla* rituals meaningful, to kids and adults alike. We strive for prayer experiences filled with *kavana*, but feel stymied by the difficulty or the sheer length of the *keva*. The range of educational materials developed to teach *tefilla* are mostly, in one way or another, strategies for bridging this gap – how to say the *keva* liturgy in a way that feels personal, how to use it as a springboard for more personal thoughts, or how to see the liturgical texts as giving guidance for reflection.

These are important responses to the problem we confront in *tefilla*, but in rushing to convince students that our liturgy can be “prayerful”, we rush past a crucial point: *it is a very good question*. However we dress up the *siddur*, whatever strategies we offer for extracting meaning, the fact is that it feels forced precisely because a fixed, universal, daily ritual does not seem designed to facilitate ideal prayer as we imagine it. If anything, the length and foreignness of the liturgy make it harder for our communal prayer spaces to facilitate what we would call “real” prayer experiences. And before we rush to offer resolutions, it is worth dwelling on why that should be the case.

I want to suggest that in our thinking about the challenges presented by the liturgy, we fail to recognize what the liturgy as it is constructed was intended to be and what it is meant to accomplish. Without appreciating the goals it is designed to achieve, we are unable to assess either how well it achieves them or how relevant those goals may be for us.² I argue that our

¹ I use the Hebrew term *tefilla* here to refer specifically to communal prayer services employing some form of traditional liturgy, in contrast to the English term “prayer” which I use more broadly to encompass a wide range of forms.

² This is an application of a core principle of analyzing systems: Before deciding that a system is failing to achieve its goals, one should consider the possibility that it is successfully achieving other goals. One can then decide

liturgy was designed with a clear set of goals that are important and compelling, but are not the goals we normally associate with authentic prayer. Appreciating that frame can help us to make sense of why our liturgy has its structure and how we can open ourselves to its spiritual potential. It can also help us to clarify the ongoing challenge of bridging the *keva-kavana* gap. We will see that we are trying to use a ritual, designed to create one type of experience, to facilitate a type of experience which is quite different and seems on the surface to be incompatible.

I will illustrate this idea through a reading of an oft-discussed passage from Talmud Berakhot about how our prayers were “established”. But to fully develop this reading, we need to look at a bit of background.

The Mishna in Tractate Berakhot chapter 4 lays out the basic ground rules for rabbinic prayer. Mishna 1 sets out the proper times for each service, Mishna 5 the proper way to stand. Mishna 3 presents the following disagreement about the content of the service:

Rabban Gamliel says: Every day one must recite the 18 Blessings (*shemona esrei*).

R. Joshua says: A summary of the 18 Blessings.

R. Akiva says: If his prayer is fluent he says the 18 Blessings, if not he recites the summary.

Discussions of this text tend to focus on the point of disagreement about what version of the 18 Blessings one should recite. But we should not overlook the point on which they agree. These 3 Tannaim, members of the generation that founded the Yavneh academy immediately after the Destruction of the Temple, all accept the notion that there is a fixed set of blessings that is to be recited in some form by every Jew every day. They already present a picture of a prayer ritual which has been set by the Rabbis and which allows for no variation from one person to the next or one day to the next.

This is significant because these Rabbis were probably not recording a long-standing communal practice. Consider the following statement, from Berakhot 28b: “The Rabbis taught: Shimon the wool-spinner ordered the 18 Blessings before R. Gamliel at Yavneh.” This stunning line presents the claim, which I would argue reflects at least an approximation of the truth, that the fixed, standardized *tefilla*, the “18 Blessings”, was first compiled under the guidance of Rabban Gamliel himself at Yavneh in the immediate post-Temple period!³ There was certainly

whether these alternate goals are themselves desirable or not. In this case I am arguing that the alternate goals are themselves significant elements of a rich spiritual practice.

³ The Talmud (Megilla 17b) also preserves an alternate account which attributes the 18 Blessings to the Men of the Great Assembly, thus from centuries earlier. This tradition, however, is historically far less plausible and most likely reflects a later desire to grant the liturgy the sheen of great antiquity. As Larry Hoffman explains, “the Great Assembly was probably a hypothetical construct of later Rabbis who recognized that their own history as a rabbinic class went back, at the most, to the second century BCE.” “How the *Amidah* Began”, in *My People’s Prayer Book vol. 2: The Amidah*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 19. I follow Hoffman’s conclusion that the ascription of the fixed liturgy to Rabban Gamliel most likely reflects the historical reality. As he

prayer before – the story itself could be read to suggest that Shimon the wool-spinner arranged blessings that had been composed earlier – but the notion of a fixed set of themes that one would say daily, that every Jew would recite the same blessings, seems to be a post-Temple innovation. Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Joshua, and Rabbi Akiva, quoted in the Mishna above, were the sages who first established this practice.

It turns out, though, that acceptance of this practice was not as universal as I suggested. Here is the full text of the Mishna, with one final view included:

Rabban Gamliel says: Every day one must recite the 18 Blessings.

R. Joshua says: A summary of the 18 Blessings.

R. Akiva says: If his prayer is fluent he says the 18 Blessings, if not he recites the summary.

R. Eliezer says: *One who makes his prayer fixed, that prayer is not [true] petition.*

R. Eliezer's statement is usually read as a separate comment rather than part of the preceding discussion. This is natural because the other 3 statements are closely related in their wording and R. Eliezer's statement is phrased differently. This is certainly the way the Talmud chooses to read it – it asks what he meant by “fixed” and gives several suggestions, all of which presume that he was concerned with *how* you recite the 18 Blessings. When you say these blessings, he would be saying, make sure not to do them in a “fixed” way, whatever that means.

But I would argue that in truth his opposition is much deeper, and much more destabilizing to the system of rabbinic *tefilla* being presented in Berakhot chapter 4.⁴ According to this reading, R. Eliezer responds to the discussion of the 18 Blessings by saying that one who recites such fixed, standard prayers *at all* is not really doing prayer in its true sense – pouring out one's personal needs and emotions before God. He is rejecting the entire *keva* structure, even the notion of having a structure. He sees in it what our students see – the opposite of what he believes authentic, from the heart prayer is meant to be. This means that R. Eliezer's critique was probably not limited to the specific blessings. The whole *keva* structure set out in Mishna Berakhot – fixed times, a fixed text, a prescribed way to stand and what direction to face – would probably have been deemed *keva* and thus invalid by Rabbi Eliezer.

This makes sense in light of the newness of the practice – R. Eliezer is consistently described as a fierce opponent of rabbinic innovation. It also gives us a picture of a moment in time, a moment of intentional change in practice. The radically altered situation of the Jews, perhaps the loss of the Temple itself, created a need for a formal, set, communal prayer ritual that had not existed before. The recognition that this change happened at a particular moment

writes, “[Rabban Gamliel's] codification of the *Amidah* was part of his larger agenda of standardizing rabbinic practice in general.” 21

⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reads Rabbi Eliezer's view in exactly this way. See *Covenant and Conversation Exodus*, 228-231 (London: Maggid Books, 2010).

in time and was directed by specific people enables us to think concretely about their motivations and goals in creating this ritual.⁵ We can now ask, why did they lay out this form of ritual and this content? What social and communal needs did this ritual fulfill, and to what extent do we have similar needs?

With that background, we can now turn to the text that will be our primary focus, a debate in Talmud Berakhot 26b about the origins of the prayer services. This is a rich text that has generated a wide range of interpretations. I offer it here as a window into what I believe was the defining conceptual debate among the Rabbis about what prayer is supposed to be, a debate that drove the dispute in the Mishna and continues to shape our tortured relationship to our liturgy to this day.⁶

The passage begins with the following debate:

Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Hanina said: The Forefathers established prayer.

R. Joshua ben Levi said: Prayer was established to correspond to the daily sacrifices.⁷

The Talmud goes on to bring sources that both support and flesh out each of these positions. The first source attributes each of the 3 daily services to one of the Forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with a proof-text from Genesis linking that figure with the corresponding service. The second source tells us that the specific time parameters for each of the daytime services (*shacharit*, *mincha*, and *musaf* – the evening service stands as an awkward outlier) are taken from the rules that governed the corresponding Temple sacrifices.

On its surface, the passage seems to simply offer competing explanations for the origin of the three daily prayer services and their designated times. This is a very unsatisfying explanation, however, for two reasons. First, if this is the question, neither answer is at all convincing. There is no indication that the Forefathers, whatever prayers they did or did not offer (see below), started any ritual that they or their children then performed regularly, or

⁵ Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbinic Prayer in Late Antiquity," in *Cambridge History of Judaism IV*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 573-611, describes in detail how the Rabbis gradually incorporated elements of Temple ritual into the synagogue and liturgy. Kimelman suggests that the synagogue came to incorporate more and more Temple symbols and rituals over time, beginning with Rabban Gamliel but taking root more firmly in the following centuries. Throughout this period, he describes the Rabbis as struggling with the challenge of "how to appropriate Temple terminology to create a religious continuum without creating a religious equivalency." (575)

⁶ For a fuller discussion of this passage which takes a similar approach, see Rabbi Daniel Landes, "Prayer as Petition", in *My People's Prayer Book vol. 2: The Amidah* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 1-8.

⁷ The text literally reads "They established prayer..." It does not identify to whom "they" refers, but it is presumably a reference to the Rabbis themselves, in line with the claim that Rabban Gamliel oversaw the creation of the liturgy.

even that the Rabbis thought they did. And there were only two daily sacrifices each day, as opposed to the three services. The second reason is that there are in fact clear textual sources for both the number and times for these services in the Bible, verses that the Rabbis use in this very context in Tosefta Berakhot 3:6. Daniel 6:11 recounts that, despite a decree of the king, Daniel “kneeled upon his knees *three times a day*, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did normally.” The author of Psalms 55:18 tells us that in times of sorrow, “evening, morning, and afternoon I call out and weep, and God hears my voice.” The Tosefta explicitly identifies these three times with our *arvit* (evening), *shacharit* (morning), and *mincha* (afternoon) services!⁸ Our passage, the debate about whether the Forefathers or the sacrifices are the basis for the establishment of the prayers, should then be read as a deeper debate about the essential nature and purpose of prayer.

We will begin with the first, the source explaining the idea that “the Forefathers established prayer.”⁹ Here is the text:

Abraham established *shacharit* (morning prayer), as it says: "Abraham rose up early in morning to the place where he had stood before God." And "standing" is really "prayer".

Isaac established *mincha* (afternoon prayer), as it says: Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. And "meditation" is really "prayer".

Jacob established *maariv* (evening prayer), as it says: He encountered the place and stopped for the night. And "encounter" is really "prayer".

The claim that the Forefathers established prayer is not primarily a historical one. So what do their actions teach us about prayer? The Forefathers present a prototype for what prayer in its essence ought to be, a model that Rabbi Yose ben R. Hanina wishes us to emulate. So let us consider the verses cited in this text to support each attribution in that light. What model of prayer do the Forefathers offer us?

When did Abraham model prayer for us? The key phrase that suggests to the Rabbis that he prayed, *stood before God*, refers to the famous moment when Abraham debates with God about the justice of destroying the city of Sodom. Consider this moment: God decides, for the first time since the Flood, to share with a human God’s plan to destroy the wicked, in this case the sin-filled city of Sodom. Abraham, unlike Noah, *stands up to God*, pleading not for his own benefit but in defense of others. It is an encounter both of great urgency and of profound intimacy between Creature and Creator, one that is deeply rooted in the needs of a particular moment in time. This act of pleading with God for social justice is the one through which Abraham, in the Rabbinic reading, models the act of prayer.

⁸ This is not a historical claim, since the actual origins of 3x/day prayer are difficult to pinpoint, but rather to say that the Rabbis had biblical sources that clearly supported the practice. See Kimelman, 587-589.

⁹ For clarity I have omitted the ancillary proof-texts, which are not relevant to this reading of the passage.

Isaac's prayer moment is no less profound but also profoundly different. Isaac is wandering alone in a field in the late afternoon. His 'prayer word' is *lasuach*, which is translated here as "meditate" but more commonly means "speak" or "converse" – easily read as speaking with God. He is in a moment of great transition and intense emotion. He is pulled between deep sadness over the death of his mother and excitement and/or trepidation over the impending arrival of his future wife. Four verses later the arrival of Rebecca will finally bring him comfort from his loss, but in this moment his is still a life in upheaval. We can imagine the tone of his prayer – reaching out to God for solace, giving voice to his sadness and fears. It is a prayer that is emotion-filled and introspective, a cry from within that needs a listening ear more than an answer. This pouring out of his heart is the act through which Isaac models the act of prayer.

Jacob's prayer moment is the most explicitly prayerful of the three. He stops to rest during his flight from his brother Esav, leaving behind his home and family. He sees the dream of the ladder in which God promises to protect him, and upon awakening vows to follow God in exchange for that guardianship. In fear for his life and of an unknown future, he needs guidance and protection as he sets out on his journey. His 'prayer word', "encounter", suggests approaching God to plead for mercy or respite from troubles, which is exactly what he does – even if he did not realize it at first. His prayer, his need for God comes from a place of deep fear and uncertainty, a sense of being alone in the world. It is the type of prayer that we often see as the most natural and heartfelt – asking God to watch over him as he sets out into the unknown and to bring him home safely. This act of petitioning God, of throwing himself on God's mercy, is the way that Jacob models for us what it means to pray.

What do these archetypical prayer moments teach us? First we have to see what they have in common. The Forefathers' prayers were spontaneous and full of emotion. They were offered at key moments of change in their own lives or in the world around them. They were deeply personal, responding directly to the experiences and needs of those weighty moments, and each suggests a very direct and intimate communication with God. They reflect, in other words, our conceptual image of true or ideal prayer. In their content, though, they were radically different from each other.¹⁰ Each person's prayer focused entirely on the experiences and needs of the moment – it could not be repeated by other people or even by the speaker himself at a different point in his story. They were also totally different kinds of prayer – Abraham speaks out loudly for justice; Isaac quietly shares the heavy burden of his sorrow; and Jacob asks directly and urgently for help. In other words, prayer that expresses the authentic voice of one's heart can take a variety of forms and is by definition different for each person and at each moment.

¹⁰ Sacks has a powerful description of the different ways in which each of the Forefathers encountered God. See *Covenant and Conversation Genesis*, 180-182.

Yet if we are asking “where did OUR *TEFILLOT* come from?” there is clearly a right answer, and it is not the Forefathers. Here is the source that explains the view that “they established prayer to correspond to the daily sacrifices”:¹¹

Why did they say [in the Mishna] "The morning prayer is said until noon"? Because the morning sacrifice in the Temple was offered until noon.

And why did they say "The afternoon prayer is said until evening"? Because the afternoon sacrifice was offered until evening.

And why did they say "The evening prayer has no fixed time"? Because the leftovers from the sacrifices were left to burn all night.

And why did they say "The Musaf prayer is said all day"? Because the Musaf sacrifice in the Temple was offered all day.

This text is simple and direct, totally lacking the poetry of the first source. It answers a different question – not *who* established the prayers or even *how* or *when*, but what it means, in concrete terms, to say that prayer “corresponds to” the daily sacrifices. It proceeds step by step through the Mishna, linking the times given for each service to specific Temple offerings. And it accurately reflects the rabbinic prayer ritual, which prescribes set times for each service.

In fact, the correspondence goes much deeper than that. Almost every aspect of *tefilla* as outlined by the Rabbis seems to correspond to the sacrificial rituals in the Temple. The notion that we repeat the identical worship ritual each day and multiple times a day is central to the Torah’s description of the daily sacrifice in Numbers 28. The sacrifices had a fixed liturgy that was recited as they were performed, with precisely choreographed movements, and had to be done standing while wearing special ritual garments. They were also communal, a single sacrifice offered on behalf of the whole community.

Seen in this light, it feels almost self-evident that, however we imagine prayer as an abstract concept, **our *tefillot* were created to fill the communal and spiritual role that sacrifices played for the Israelites of the Temple Period. They are meant as communal performance rites, rituals of serving and sanctifying God.** Once we recognize this intention, we can begin to think about the goals and power of our liturgy in the language of communal ritual rather than personal expression. Like sacrifices, the liturgy was meant to be an ongoing, defining and communal spiritual practice, one that shapes a shared view of the world rather than giving voice to each person’s internal perspective. It is primarily experiential, a performance that gains potency precisely through constant repetition. Above all, its focus is service, giving to God in gratitude for the daily gifts that fill our lives, rather than requests for extraordinary consideration at times of great need.

¹¹ Here too I have omitted the references to Rabbi Yehuda’s view regarding each service in order to keep focus on the main argument.

Most of us begin with an idealized image of prayer that more closely matches the type of experience modeled by the Forefathers. And I imagine R. Eliezer, in fighting against the establishment of this ritual, raging that “sacrifice prayer” and “Forefather prayer” are in a deep sense utterly incompatible – that the moment you ask everyone to ritualize prayer, you kill the sparks of authentic personal expression that are its essence. Formal, prescribed, communal ritual not only leaves little room for the personal, it tends to stamp it out. I am deeply sympathetic to R. Eliezer’s frustration. Yet I know that we could not do without our liturgy, because it is literally the thing that teaches us how to pray, that gives us a language and an image of what it means to try to communicate with and connect to the Divine. And so I imagine Rabban Gamliel himself making a difficult choice, aware that instituting a fixed *tefilla* practice brings with it a real loss, but seeing the need for a unifying and guiding prayer ritual as more pressing.

While the Rabbis overrode R. Eliezer’s objections to their formalized prayer ritual, they never stopped hearing his critique. Our passage openly acknowledges this. Despite the superiority of the sacrifice model for explaining our prayer practice, R. Yose ben R. Hanina is given the last word: “Surely the Forefathers *established* the prayers; the Rabbis later found support for them from the sacrifices.” Or perhaps better: The Forefathers established the practice, but the Rabbis gave it concrete form by adapting details from the sacrificial rituals. Our rituals may derive from the sacrifices, but prayer as a form of communication ought to resemble the forefathers’ experience. Despite the conflict between them, the Rabbis cannot let go of either model.

Various rabbinic texts offer models for how to create space for the personal within the communal frame. Mishna Berakhot 5:1 depicts the “early pious ones” meditating for a full hour before praying to reach a place of intimate, personal connection. They found *kavana* in the state of mind they sought to be in when they recited the *tefilla*. Mishna 4:2 tells of the sage Rabbi Nechunia ben Hakana, who composed his own personal prayer that he recited when he entered the study house and when he left it. He created a separate space for a more personal *kavana* experience separate from the communal *keva* prayers. The Talmud, in trying to redefine the meaning of R. Eliezer’s position, suggests that to personalize the experience one say the fixed blessings “in the language of petition” or add one new idea each time she recites them (BT Berakhot 28b). And the Amora Rav teaches that one may (should?) add personal requests during the final blessing of request, *shomeia tefilla* (‘who hears prayer’), and may add any other personal prayers to the end of the formal liturgy (BT Berakhot 31a).

The sheer variety of “solutions” makes clear that there is no easy answer to this challenge. It also shows that the Rabbis, in establishing ritual *tefilla*, in no way meant to

invalidate the ideal of personal prayer. They were deeply engaged with the problem of how we can have meaningful, individual experiences when performing this uniform, communal ritual. They were aware of the power and importance of the Forefathers' ideal and continued to pursue it even as it always seemed elusive. They needed these two opposing concepts of prayer to live together, even though they did not have clear answers about how to make that work.

I began with a question: Why, if prayer is meant to feel personal and intimate, does our liturgy represent the opposite – a highly prescribed ritual that seems repetitive, impersonal, and rote? We saw the source for this tension in the very origins of the liturgy. The Rabbis held up an idealized image of a personal, intimate prayer experience modeled on the Forefathers, but in practice developed a liturgy, a ritual, that was meant to recreate the regular, formal, communal worship of the Temple sacrifices. Indeed, we saw that, sitting in Yavneh after the loss of the Temple, Rabban Gamliel made a conscious choice that the community needed the guidance and structure of ritualized *tefilla* despite the threat, emphasized by Rabbi Eliezer, that it posed to free expression.

Once we recognize the centrality of the sacrificial model for our liturgy, many things come into focus. The constant repetition of the main text; the idea that we all say the same text, and that though prayer is private we recite it publically, in a *minyan*; and the set times all fit neatly into this paradigm. This frame helps us see that all of those elements make perfect sense. More than that, it can enable us to see the practice of *tefilla* as *important*, spiritually and communally. We use ritual in all areas of our lives to shape our relationships, our values, and our understanding of the world. Ritual can carry meaning in many ways, and there are various ways that we can draw on its power to better realize the potential of the *tefilla* experience. But the first step is to see the habit, the routine, the deep imprinting of the liturgy on mind and heart as a key source of that power and to dwell in them instead of seeing them only as hindrances.

This acknowledgment also helps us to understand why 'personalizing' our *tefilla* is so challenging. It can free us of the belief that our difficulty in finding inspiration in the words represents a personal shortcoming. We can have more *rachmanut*, more patience with ourselves, our students, and our congregants when we don't feel or act inspired, because doing so demands swimming against the natural currents of the liturgy itself. And I want to make clear that **it requires effort and intentionality to create and preserve space for individual expression and self-exploration when the basic frame is fixed and formal.** It can be done, but only if we actively identify and utilize openings, whether as individual pray-ers or as prayer leaders. And this is hard to do, since it is, by definition, not part of the routine.

I want to conclude with a few practical considerations about what these observations mean for how we pray and how we enable others – students, congregants, or peers – to more fully experience prayer. I speak about what we can do ourselves although they are equally relevant to teaching others out of a belief that becoming better prayer leaders begins with working on our own relationship to prayer.

- 1) If our goal is not only to have meaningful prayer experiences but to find those experiences through the traditional liturgy and communal prayer practices, we need to acknowledge and celebrate its form. We should talk about the prayer experience and prayer space in terms of ritual performance – its dynamics and power, how to be open to its visceral force, and what the goals of formal rituals are. Many of those goals, such as cultivating gratitude and wonder at the everyday and engaging in honest self-assessment, are goals that we not only can relate to but would consider deeply important.
- 2) Most lessons meant to make the liturgy meaningful focus on finding the meaning in specific words. But if our liturgy is meant as performance, its power may be unconnected to its content. The *siddur* can function as a mantra, a hum that frees our minds to wander and enables us to hear the hidden voices of our hearts. Communal singing can offer a kind of spiritual uplift that may reach beyond the province of words altogether. We should, in the words of Rabbi Larry Hoffman, learn to think of Worship as Art and of prayer leaders as shaping Experiences, not only leading the recital of specific texts.
- 3) We should also be aware that the goals of personal meaning and expression *are* vital *tefilla* goals but *are not* naturally facilitated by our *tefilla* structure. We should actively and intentionally creating openings and spaces for individual reflection. This can happen in many ways. We can work to make personal connections to texts from the *siddur* so that the liturgy can serve as a springboard that evokes our own memories, values, and feelings. We can create pauses in a service where participants are invited to free themselves from the page to find their voices or simply to be aware of what is around them or what is within them. We can begin *tefilla* by sharing personal reflections or concerns that encourage others to identify and reflect on their own concerns. And many others.

There are many ways that we can and should try to bridge the daunting gap between *keva* and *kavana*. All of them, though, begin from a recognition that the liturgy itself does not do it for us – that we need to actively teach how to do this and, in our role as prayer leaders, give people the space and the permission to explore.