

The Sh'ma and Its Blessings

The Effect of Prayer

Prayer is a way of sensitizing ourselves to the wonder of life, of expressing gratitude, and of praising and acknowledging the reality of God. One need not believe that God will interfere with the ongoing process of nature to feel that prayer is worthwhile. We may have different understandings of what God is. No definition we have is sufficient or answers all doubts and questions. To be aware that God exists—that there is more in the universe than physical matter, that a moral order is inherent in creation, that humans are responsible for their conduct and can help to bring about the perfection, or at least the improvement, of the world and of life—that is sufficient reason for prayer.

—REUVEN HAMMER

The Congregation

Tabernacle and Temple gave visible assurance of God's care and accessibility. But once that locus of divine indwelling was destroyed, what could possibly replace it? The destruction of God's house should have augured the demise of Judaism. The well-known answer, of course, is that the rabbis, who replaced the priests at the helm of the nation, came up with the institution of the synagogue. But what, exactly, constituted a synagogue? How would we have recognized one? The heart of this radically new institution was neither a building nor a book, but a number. Whereas, prior to the Temple's end, holiness was ascribed to a sacred place that could not be duplicated, after 70 C.E. holiness resided inconspicuously in the quorum of ten without which basic communal rituals could not be enacted. To conduct a worship service, to recite certain prayers, to chant from the Torah or Prophets, to perform a wedding or a funeral, all required a *minyan* (Mishnah Megillah 4:3). . . . The Talmud echoes the new salience of a *minyan*. Once, Rabbi Yitzhak asked his friend, Rav Nahman, why he had failed to come to the synagogue to pray. "I couldn't," he responded. "So you should have gathered ten men on your own to pray," chided Rabbi Yitzhak. "It was too troublesome." "Well, at least," needed Rabbi Yitzhak, "you should have had a synagogue official come to inform you when exactly the congregation would be praying [so that you might join them from afar]." At which point, Rav Nahman protested, "What's this all about?" "We have a tradition," asserted Rabbi Yitzhak, "that goes back to Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai that this is the intent of the verse, 'As for me, may my prayer come to You, O Lord, at a favorable moment' (Psalm 69:14). And what indeed constitutes that 'favorable moment'? It is when the congregation is absorbed in prayer" (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 7b–8a).

—ISMAR SCHORSCH

A MEDITATION FOR BAR'KHU

Almighty no thing exists without You and none can be like You the source of all maker and creator
You have no image eyes observe but the soul lodged in the heart recognizes You and sees
Your glory's breadth encompassing all for in You all finds its place but You occupy no place
my soul seeing but unseen come thank the seeing but unseen and bless

Bar'khu: The Call to Worship Together

Bar'khu, the leader's invitation to prayer, is recited while standing. The leader bows when saying the word "bar'khu" (praise) and stands straight when reciting the name of God. Similarly, the congregation bows at the word "barukh" (praise) and straightens to full height at the recitation of God's name.

Leader:

Praise ADONAI, to whom all praise is directed.

Congregation, then the leader repeats:

‡ Praise ADONAI, to whom all praise is directed forever and ever.

Barukh Adonai ha-m'vorakh l'olam va-ed.

We are seated.

רְשׁוֹת לְבָרְכוּ
מְשֻׁבְּיָב בְּבָחוּ מִי בְלָמוֹ וְקָמָהוּ?
כִּי הוּא מְקוֹר הַכֹּל, יֵצֵרוֹ וְעִשְׂהוּ.
כִּן לֹ דְמֹת עֵינָיו לֹא רְאִמְתָּ, בְּלִמְתִּי
נִפְשׁ בְּלֵב תִּפְדֵּי אֹתוֹ וְתִצְפְּהוּ;
עֲצֹם כְּבוֹדוֹ הַכִּיל כֹּל, וְכֵן נִקְרָא:
מְקוֹם לְכֹל כִּי לֹא מְקוֹם יִבְלֶהוּ.
רְאֵה וְלֹא נִרְאִית, לִרְאֵה וְלֹא נִרְאֵה
בְּאֵי נְהוּדֵי אֲתֵרְאֲדֵי וְנִבְרָהוּ.

Bar'khu, the leader's invitation to prayer, is recited while standing. The leader bows when saying the word בְּרַכּוּ and stands straight when reciting the name of God. Similarly, the congregation bows at the word בְּרַכּוּ and straightens to full height at the recitation of God's name.

Leader:

בְּרַכּוּ אֲתֵרְיֵהוּ הַמְּבָרֵךְ.

Congregation, then the leader repeats:

‡ בְּרַחוּ יֵהוּה הַמְּבָרֵךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

We are seated.

ing recitation of the Sh'ma; it speaks of redemption, reflecting the theme of the exodus from Egypt, which is introduced in the third paragraph of the Sh'ma.

ALMIGHTY בְּבָחוּ בְּדָחוּ מְשֻׁבְּיָב בְּבָחוּ בְּדָחוּ. A meditation for Bar'khu written by Yehudah Halevi (Spain, d. 1141).

BAR'KHU: THE CALL TO WORSHIP TOGETHER. The leader calls the congregation together as a *minyan*; the congregation, by responding, acknowledges its being assembled for prayer.

TO WHOM ALL PRAISE IS DIRECTED. The Talmud of the Land of Israel explains the word *ha-m'vorakh* to mean "whom all of us praise" (Berakhot 73).

קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּבְרַכּוֹתֶיהָ

INTRODUCTION TO THE RECITATION OF THE SH'MA. The call to worship marks the formal beginning of the Shaḥarit (morning) service. Shaḥarit always includes two central moments: the Recitation of the Sh'ma, and the Amidah (the silent prayer). *B'rakhot* surrounds the Sh'ma serve to interpret the themes of its biblical verses. Preceding the Sh'ma, in which we declare that God is one, are two *b'rakhot*. The first affirms that God is the creator of all, further remarking on the wonder of creation and the morning light. The first paragraph of the Sh'ma speaks of the love for God, and so the second *b'rakhah* acknowledges the inverse: God's love of the people Israel as manifest in the gifts of the teachings of Torah. A single *b'rakhah* follows the morning recitation of the Sh'ma; it speaks of redemption, reflecting the theme of the exodus from Egypt, which is introduced in the third paragraph of the Sh'ma.

ALMIGHTY בְּבָחוּ בְּדָחוּ מְשֻׁבְּיָב בְּבָחוּ בְּדָחוּ. A meditation for Bar'khu written by Yehudah Halevi (Spain, d. 1141).

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