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# KOL HAMEVASER

THE JEWISH THOUGHT MAGAZINE OF THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY STUDENT BODY

**Our Side of the Mehitsah:  
An Open Letter**  
*David Kolmar, p. 3*

**Creating Community:  
Prayer at Stern**  
*Elana Raskas, p. 5*

**Worship: For Us or for  
Him?**  
*Yakov Danishefsky, p. 6*

**An Interview with Rabbi  
Ronald Schwarzberg**  
*Chesky Kopel, p. 10*

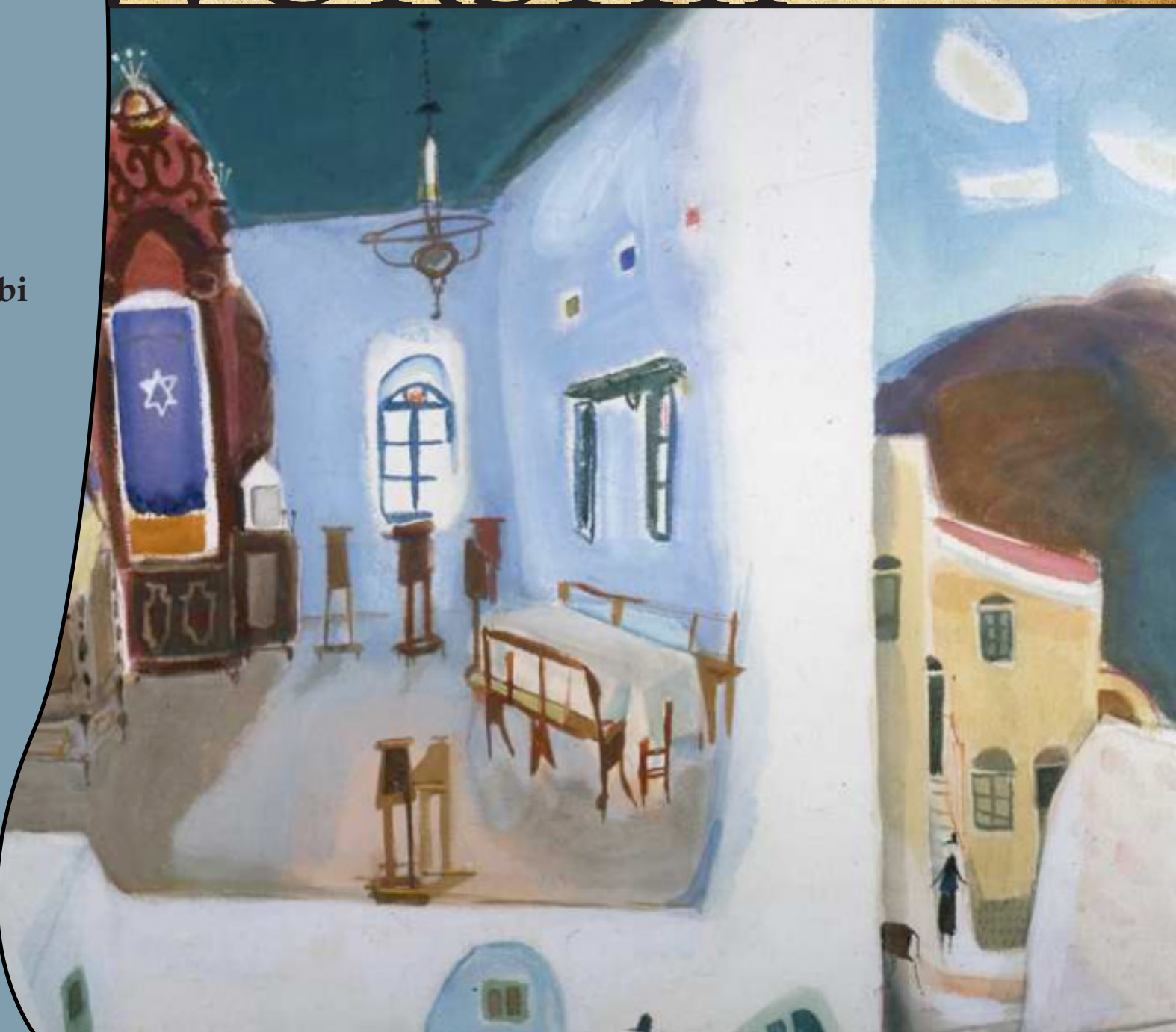
**The Role of the Sheliah  
Tsibbur: A Historical  
Perspective**  
*Dovi Nadel, p. 11*

**"This is My Lord and  
I Will Beautify Him":  
From the Beth Alpha  
Synagogue to  
Synagogue in Safed**  
*Atara Siegel, p. 17*

**Creative Arts Section**  
*P. 18-19*

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## WORSHIP







## KOL HAMEVASER

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THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY STUDENT BODY

## WORSHIP

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*Kol Hamevaser*, the Jewish Thought magazine of the Yeshiva University student body, is dedicated to sparking discussion of Jewish issues on the Yeshiva University campus and beyond. The magazine hopes to facilitate the religious and intellectual growth of its readership and serves as a forum for students to express their views on a variety of issues that face the Jewish community. It also provides opportunities for young thinkers to engage Judaism intellectually and creatively, and to mature into confident leaders.

*Kol Hamevaser* is published monthly and its primary contributors are undergraduates, although it includes input from RIETS Roshei Yeshivah, YU professors, and outside figures. In addition to its print magazine, *Kol Hamevaser* also sponsors special events, speakers, discussion groups, conferences, and shabbatonim. We encourage anyone interested in writing about or discussing Jewish issues to get involved in our community, and to participate in the magazine, the conversation, and our club's events. Find us online at [www.kolhamevaser.com](http://www.kolhamevaser.com), or on Facebook or Twitter.

### Our Side of the *Mehitsah*: An Open Letter

A call for common sense: Make women feel comfortable in *shul*.

3

Davida Kollmar  
5

### Creating Community: Prayer at Stern

The Stern community would gain immeasurably from communal davening. So if not now, when?

Elana Raskas  
6

### Worship: For Us or for Him?

Why should we worship God?

Yakov Danishefsky

9

### Patriarchs and Sacrifices: The Philosophical Backing to Prayer

Perhaps the argument in the Gemara about the basis for prayer can shed light on the ideal mode of worship.

Sarah Robinson

10

### An Interview with Rabbi Ronald Schwarzberg

Rabbi Ronald Schwarzberg discusses his role in rabbinic placement, and how his twenty-five years of experience as a pulpit rabbi have informed that role.

Chesky Kopel

11

### The Role of the *Sheliah Tsibbur*: A Historical Perspective

A look through history to uncover how the role of the *sheliah tsibbur* has altered and developed over time.

Dovi Nadel

13

### Between Spontaneity and Structure: Two Models of Prayer

Uncovering the philosophy of prayer presented in Rambam's *Hilkhot Tefillah*.

Gilad Barach

15

### Synagogues: Ensuring a Nation's Continuation

The synagogues that existed during the Second Temple period were different from those that exist today, as they were not places of prayer.

Penina Wein

### Agnon's "Whirlwind of Voices":

#### Secular Zionism, Hanukkah, and Contemporary Jewish Identity

Our interpretation of the meaning of Hanukkah reflects our interpretation of Jewish identity and values.

16

Roni Zemelman

## CREATIVE ARTS

### "This is My Lord and I Will Beautify Him":

#### From the Beth Alpha Synagogue to Synagogue in Safed

What can a grand edifice of the Galilee and a small, modest structure from Safed possibly have in common?

17

Atara Siegel

### Images from the Yeshiva University Museum

Torah Crown

Haggadah and Order of Services for Various Holidays

Book of Psalms

Orden De Oraciones Cotidianas

Model of the Beth Alpha Synagogue

Model of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue

Synagogue in Safed

The Dedication of the Portuguese Jews Synagogue at Amsterdam

18-19

# Editors' Thoughts: The Riddle of Worship

BY: CHUMIE YAGOD

I must confess; when I sat down to write this introduction, I found myself overwhelmed by a sense of chasing phantoms through a foggy maze. Upon my capture of a thought, it either evaporated before I could grasp hold, or else fractured into a thousand other thoughts. There appeared to be so many concepts compressed into the topic of worship, and, to complicate the matter, so many manifestations of each concept with rapidly multiplying interconnections throughout; how was I to isolate any one strand? And yet, one aspect did assert itself most insistently through the morass: Man's attempt to communicate with God through various media.

Oddly, what seemed so compelling to me about the communication aspect of

worship was its very elusiveness. The idea of establishing a relationship with God is a bold, almost brazen one; what can we, limited beings, offer God, the One Who created us? From another angle, it seems an almost absurd proposition in its essence: How can a physical being communicate with the Divine? The vast chasm between Man and God ought to doom any attempt to bridge that gap to tragic failure.

And yet, Man has reached out to God since the beginning of history.<sup>1</sup> How are we to understand such a phenomenon? I am not interested in presenting a complicated metaphysical calculus as to how exactly the human and the Divine can meet. To my mind, the existence of such calculations highlights a far more important point: Wor-

ship is a philosophical riddle. As a way of beginning to grasp hold of this riddle, permit me to make an observation: The urge to communicate is a fundamentally human endeavor. We as people relate to others – including the Ultimate Other – instinctively. Just as an exposition on philosophy of language and epistemology is unnecessary to learn before one begins to talk, so too is an exposition of the philosophical machinery of worship unnecessary before one begins the endeavor.

This human instinct may be the most certain thing we can say about worship, relegating all other statements to the realm of the speculative. Does that doom our attempts at solving the riddle to the realms of either futility or irrelevance? I think

not. If we take a moment to consider the broader picture, perhaps the mere process of reflection carries meaning. Even if one never arrives at an answer, maybe the act of contemplation alone can add depth and significance to the worship experience. In this issue of *Kol Hamevaser*, we explore the theme of worship – how it is done, where it is done, and why it is done. Think, read, and, most importantly, continue the conversation!

<sup>1</sup> See the story of Kayin and Hevel, *Bereshit* 4:3-5. This story presents the first instance of Man reaching out to God proactively, and not merely communicating with Him reactively.

## Our Side of the *Mehitsah*: An Open Letter

BY: DAVIDA KOLLMAR

One of the main focuses of Jewish life in the Modern Orthodox community, at least among adults, is the synagogue. And yet, there are several aspects of synagogue life that alienate half of the Jewish population. Many synagogues do things that make women feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. These problems are not specific to my *shul* at home, but are general issues that my friends and I have experienced in various different communities.

You may have read my introduction so far and think that I am about to embark on a feminist rant. But I am not advocating for the abolishment of *mehitsot*, or the institution of women *shelihei tsibbur*, or women rabbis, or anything else that should be controversial halakhically; that would be a topic for another article. The ideas for which I am advocating are ones that I think should be common sense, but apparently, based on general practice, are not. I am not advocating that we push the boundaries of women's roles in *shuls*; rather, I am asking that women be treated with respect while they are within those boundaries.

One of the major problems I have seen in *shuls* is that there is often no women's section for *minyanim* during the week. While most women do not go to *minyanim* daily, there are those who would like to, and there needs to be a space for them to *daven*. When women show up at *shul* and there is no *mehitsah* set up for them, they are either turned away or forced to wait as a *mehitsah* is brought from another room and put into

place. In other *shuls*, the *mehitsah* is already in the room, but it is temporary and movable. Since many *shuls* have weekday *shaharit minyanim* in a *beit midrash*, the space is used for learning the rest of the day. The chairs and *mehitsot* are often moved to make room for learning, but are not set back up when the learning is finished. The women who go to *minyan* the next morning must then set up the women's section from scratch every day. The need to set up the *mehitsah* delays *davening* and wastes everyone's time. Additionally, the men setting up the *mehitsah* often grumble about needing to take the effort to do so, which makes these women feel uncomfortable and guilty about coming to *minyan*. If *shuls* want women to feel comfortable attending, there must be spaces where women can feel welcome and accommodated, and one step in doing so is to already have the women's section ready for them when they come in the morning.

Even in *shuls* where there is a women's section, there is sometimes no place for women to *daven* because there are men *davening* in the

women's section. This past summer, my family went on vacation and we all went to the local *shul* on a Monday evening. There was a women's section set up, so my mother and I went to sit down. One of the members of the *shul* informed us that the men's section usually overflows into the women's section, and demanded that we leave so that the men would be able to *daven* where we were sitting. It could be argued that the man's request was reasonable; after all, the men have a *hiyyuv* to *daven* with a *minyan*, while my mother and I do not. However, I believe that if there is a women's section, it is logical that the space should be reserved for women. If men need to use that space then there should be an alternative space set aside for women to *daven*. In *Sukkah* 5:2, the Mishnah states that there was a "great improvement"<sup>1</sup> for the *simhat beit ha-sho'ei-vah*. The Gemara there explains that the improvement was that a balcony was

erected for the women to stand on during the celebration so that they would not mingle with the men. Before making the balcony, the *hakhamim* had tried to arrange it so that the women would be inside the *azarah* (courtyard) and the men would be outside, and later they tried the opposite, but that did not solve the problem. The balcony was a third attempt to separate the men and the women for the festivities.<sup>2</sup> The *hakhamim* did not

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women's section for the women, or at least will designate a suitable alternative space for them.

Even among *shuls* that do have a women's section that is solely dedicated to women, a common complaint is a lack of space. Women often feel like they are being packed in like sardines. It is not uncommon to find women's sections with four chairs in an area of 4x7 feet. When four women are sitting there, along with their purses and winter coats, it is clear that the area can get tight. Women do not need a lot of space, especially since they do not need the room to put down a *tallit* and *tefillin* bag. However, room to take three steps back before the *amidah* would be appreciated. Many women dislike going to *shul* because they do not feel comfortable in such a small space.

men's section. They are, therefore, unable to follow the example of those who are informed, and often cannot even see when the *aron* is open to know that they should be standing. Since the men can see what is happening, few realize that the women are confused and so no one announces what is happening. A related problem frequently occurs after *keri'at ha-Torah* (the reading of the Torah), when the congregation says "*ve-zot ha-Torah*." In some *shuls*, the women are unable to see the Torah when it is being lifted and do not know when to say this phrase. In both of these cases, there is no malice felt toward the women and the inconvenience to them is unintentional. Yet, with some awareness, these issues can be easily resolved.

Just as the women do not always know

she is forced to try to get the attention of one of the men so that he can go up to the *bimah* and submit the name for her. If she does not succeed in catching anyone's eye, she is out of luck. Again, this problem could be easily solved by designating a person to go to the women's section to see if anyone wants to contribute a name.

I have given numerous ideas in this article, and if you have seen the validity of some of my arguments, you are now hopefully thinking, "Ok, she has a point. Let's change things." But before you do so, I have one final request: *Ask the women what they want*. While I have mentioned many complaints here, a large number of which are addressed to the men in the *shuls*, I recognize that many of these men do, in fact, want to do what is best for the wom-

women will no longer feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in the synagogue and will no longer feel alienated from such an important component of community life.

*David Kolmar is a senior at SCW majoring in Physics, and is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser.*

1 Artscroll's translation.

2 *Sukkah* 51b.

3 See *Rama, Orah Hayyim* 132:2. *Rama* says that the mourner's *kaddish* is always said after *Aleinu*. If there is no mourner in the *shul*, then someone who does not have either parent still living should say it. Alternatively, someone with both parents living may also say the *kaddish* as long as the parents do not mind.

*I have given numerous ideas in this article, and if you have seen the validity of some of my arguments, you are now hopefully thinking, "Ok, she has a point. Let's change things." But before you do so, I have one final request: Ask the women what they want.*

A common response to my objections would be that since there are rarely women who come to *davening* on a weekday, it is not practical to have too much space for the women's section because that space will not be used. The men, on the other hand, would actually use the space. My response to this claim is simple. This argument is part of a vicious cycle: Women do not come to weekday *minyanim*, so people do not make the space for them. However, what then occurs is that on the occasions when women do come to *davening*, they feel uncomfortable because of the lack of space and do not want to come to *minyan* again. Then, since these women stop coming to *minyan*, the space for them is not made. If we want to encourage women to come to weekday *minyanim* regularly, the cycle needs to break somewhere, and I believe that making women feel welcome in *shul* is the first step in the right direction.

Another unrelated, yet common, problem in *shuls* is that the women often do not know what is going on. One of the times of the year when this is the most relevant is on *Tish'ah be-Av*. Much of the service is unfamiliar because it is only recited once a year. Therefore, at times, in order to know what to do, like whether to sit or stand, it is necessary to follow the example of the leaders of the congregation. The difficulty arises in *shuls* where the *mehitsot* are tall, so that women who are sitting on the floor are unable to see what is happening in the

what is going on in the men's section, so too men do not know always know what is going on in the women's section. This issue is most relevant when it comes to *kaddish*. I am aware that there are ongoing debates about whether women should even be saying *kaddish* at all. The fact is that in many Modern Orthodox *shuls*, it is accepted that women can and do say this prayer. Nevertheless, in some of these *shuls*, women will only say *kaddish* if there is a man saying *kaddish* as well. They will not, however, recite *kaddish* alone. A problem arises when there are no men saying *kaddish* because, in such situations, a woman who wants to say *kaddish* will feel unable to do so. Some *shuls* have the general practice of appointing a specific man to say *kaddish* when no one else is doing so, at least for the *kaddish* after *Aleinu*.<sup>3</sup> For those *shuls* that accept this practice, perhaps they could also have an appointed man say *kaddish* when there might be a woman who may want to say it along with him.

A lack of awareness of the women's section is also apparent when names are being submitted for a *mi she-berakh* or *Kel Male Rahamim*. In many *shuls*, the *hazzan* pauses in the middle of the prayer, and people go up to the *bimah* to give names of sick or deceased people to be included in their respective *tefillot*. However, in many cases, no one goes to the women's section to see if any of the women have names to include. In such a situation, if a woman has a name,

en. Although there are exceptions, for the most part, the men's hearts are in the right place. The problems arise when the men make the mistake of assuming that they know what the women want, without asking for any input from the women themselves. The Modern Orthodox community has recognized that women are capable of thinking, of having opinions, of expressing themselves. The existence of Stern College attests to that. It is high time for those opinions to be considered.

I hope the ideas that I have presented here will at least spark some conversation. I think that many of the concerns I have raised are easy to rectify, but since I have not been intimately involved in *shul* politics consistently throughout my life, I could be completely mistaken. My most urgent point is that even if all of my ideas are rejected, the rejection should be done in a manner that is rational and respectful, instead of in a way that makes women feel guilty for ever having asked. It may be impractical to create spaces for women, but, if this is the case, then these women should be apologized to instead of being scolded for having the audacity to want to *daven* with a *minyan*. And it may be hard to maintain communication between the men's and women's sections during *davening*, but, at the very least, there can be an awareness that the experience on the opposite sides of the *mehitsah* can be very different. Hopefully, with a change in attitude and practice,



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<sup>1</sup> and check us out on  
Facebook!





# Creating Community: Prayer at Stern

BY: ELANA RASKAS

When one thinks of any Jewish community, the first thing that probably comes to mind is a synagogue. As soon as Jews form a new community, the very first structure put in place is the synagogue, a place of prayer, Torah study, and social gathering. It is a communal space where Jews are invited to join together to worship their Creator, help those in need, and foster interpersonal relationships. And yet in my current community at Stern College, the synagogue – this vital component of communal life – is lacking.

The Stern community is hugely successful at the second piece of synagogue life: planning multiple events a day on both the Beren and Wilf campuses, between *shi'urim*, lectures, *hesed* opportunities, fun activities for the student body, and more. Stern is definitely not lacking in either educational or social means of creating a community. What Stern could stand to benefit from in order to build an even stronger community, though, is the fundamental piece of community life that is prayer.

*Hazal* took the principle of praying with a community very seriously. The *Amora* Re-

ways strive to pray with the community.<sup>3</sup> These sources, however, deal primarily, if not exclusively, with the prayer of a *tsibbur*, halakhically qualified as a quorum of ten men, or a *minyán*. The benefits of praying with a group of women, then, do not stem from the recital of *devarim she-bi-kedushah* (“holy” components of prayer that require a *tsibbur*). There are other essential considerations in davening with such a group, and it is those that I would like to address.

From a logistical standpoint, having a set time for communal prayer each morning, and perhaps afternoon and evening too, would add structure to many students’ days. One need only enter the Beren Campus Beit Midrash any time from 7:00 AM to the following 2:00 AM (even during that halakhically awkward space between *hatsot* and *minhah gedolah*),<sup>4</sup> to find many individual students davening. Students davening on most floors of the academic buildings, in the hallways and stairwells, and even in the cafeteria, are a common sight as well. I often find it difficult to wake up earlier than is necessary to just get dressed and make it to my first class,

most likely compel many women to attend services consistently and provide structure to our day, an endeavor that should not be underestimated.

Some people might find this difficult to understand. Do women not appreciate the fact that they are not halakhically obligated in communal prayer? Is it not much easier to *daven* on your own, and on your own time? Many men might give a lot for this “privilege.” And yes, it can be quite convenient. But aside from providing structure to one’s daily schedule, there are many other benefits to praying in a communal setting, if not with a *minyán* per se.

Currently, if a Stern student wishes to pray with a *minyán* in the mornings, her options are essentially limited to davening at the Adereth El synagogue on 29<sup>th</sup> St. and Lexington Avenue, at 6:50 AM on Mondays and Thursdays and 7:00 AM the rest of the week. This is not ideal for most students, whose earliest class begins at 9:00 AM. Many women have expressed interest in having a later daily *minyán* at Stern, but this would involve recruiting male commuters each morning, perhaps along with the handful of Orthodox male faculty members who arrive at Stern early each morning, and would force the Stern community to be dependent upon these men in order for communal prayer to take place.

Stern’s weekly “Mincha with a Minyan” initiative is a prime example of the difficulty of relying on others to implement communal prayer. During club hour on Wednesday afternoons, rabbis and professors who are in Stern at the specified time come to the Beit Midrash to make a *minyán* for *minhah*. Many students come to the Beit Midrash at 2:45 PM, when the *minyán* is supposed to begin, and wait an average of twenty to thirty minutes before actually beginning to *daven*. In the meantime, the curtain is drawn in the Beit Midrash, forcing students out of seats they had been occupying, for the five to nine men to sit around and schmooze where students had been and should still be learning. The Beit Midrash becomes very noisy while all await davening to proceed, interrupting the learning going on there. It takes longer to form a *minyán* than to actually *daven minhah*.

Rather than “importing” men from outside the Stern community, praying in a

communal setting composed of only Stern students will afford students the structure they seek and create stronger community as well as additional leadership opportunities within Stern. Stern women would be responsible for coordinating all scheduling, appointing various students to lead the group, giving brief *divrei Torah*, and perhaps providing students with the occasional breakfast. Students would feel a responsibility toward the group, and would work to ensure a positive, serious davening environment for all those who are interested.

From a logistical standpoint, having a set time for communal prayer each morning, and perhaps afternoon and evening too, would add structure to many students’ days.

Perhaps many students would initially be drawn to a daily *minyán*, which often seems more “legitimate” than a women’s service without *devarim she-bi-kedushah*. But there are surely women who would be interested in a communal prayer even without a *minyán*.

Many girls’ high schools and seminaries have women’s davening every day, so many students are familiar with the concept and are comfortable davening in such a forum. This initial prototype is what most students know and are accustomed to, and once it were off the ground could easily branch off into different style services to cater to different streams of the student body: beginners, Sephardic, more traditional, more progressive, etc. If the initiative to *daven* as a community were properly advertised and instated, I am confident that many students would express interest in attending and committing to participating in this service on a regular basis. The essential need is for prayer with community, in whatever form the students choose.

When I first entered Stern, I was surprised that there was no set time for davening every morning. Having had daily communal prayer as a part of my schedule since kindergarten, as many of my fellow students have had, I was reluctant to let this tradition fall by the wayside, especially if there is no real reason to see it go. Had I been told on my first day of Stern that *shaharit* takes place in the Beit Midrash daily at 8:15, I would have assumed that this is the norm here and would not have hesitated to join. I believe that if such a service were instituted at the start of the year, or even starting this coming spring semester, that it would be met with enthusiastic response and attendance.

Creating a daily *shaharit* should not be



ish Lakish states that one who prays alone, rather than with the community, is considered a “*shakhen ra*,” an evil neighbor,<sup>1</sup> and his opinion is codified in Rambam.<sup>2</sup> The *Shulhan Arukh* and its commentators stress the importance and efficacy of communal prayer, ruling that one should al-

ways strive to pray with the community.<sup>3</sup> when I know that davening is in my own hands and I have nowhere formal to be to do so. This leaves me, and many of my peers, rushing through the words, cutting out major portions of the service, or davening hurriedly in between classes. Having a set time for prayer each morning would

too difficult to arrange; it just needs to be done. Student leaders are currently interested and enthusiastic in beginning this initiative, and it is in the works for next semester. I encourage Stern students to take advantage of this new opportunity and come together to make it a success for all involved. As the synagogue is truly the centerpiece of any Jewish community, all of its components, including the central aspect of prayer, should be an integral part of the community at Stern College.<sup>5</sup>

*Elana Raskas is a senior at SCW majoring in*

*English Literature and Jewish Studies, and is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser.*

1 Berakhot 8a.

2 Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefillah u-Birkhat Kohanim* 8:1.

3 *Orah Hayyim* 90:9-10. See *Mishnah Berurah* and *Magen Avraham* ad loc.

4 Ibid. 89:1 and *Rema* and *Magen Avraham* there: One may not daven *shaharit* past *hatsot* (six *sha'ot zemaniyyot*, or halakhically defined hours, into the day). Additionally, the *Shulhan Arukh* rules in 233:1 that one may not daven *minhah* before *minhah*

*gedolah* (six and one-half *sha'ot zemaniyyot* into the day). There is therefore no prayer to be said in between *hatsot* and *minhah gedolah*.

5 I would like to express thanks to R. Avishai David and R. Mordechai Torczyner for their *shi'urim* on YU Torah ("The Incredible Power of Tefillah B'tsibbur" and "Tzibburology 4: How Communal Prayer Helps Community as well as Prayer," respectively, both available at [www.yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org)), which guided me to sources on the topic.

## Worship: For Us or For Him?

BY: YAKOV DANISHEFSKY

On one level, believing Jews must live in accordance with the divine will just because it is the divine will. We accept our role as servants of the King, each one of us obeying His laws as "*metsuveh ve-oseh*," "commanded and performing."<sup>1</sup> This is the level of "*na'aseh*," "we will do."<sup>2</sup> There is, however, another level, that of "*nishma*," "we will listen,"<sup>3</sup> understand, and become engaged. It is from the point of *nishma* that we depart into the following discussion of understanding the role of our *avodat Hashem*.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Radically different forms of worship emerge from the proponents of Jewish philosophy and Jewish mysticism, respectively. To be sure, these two groups have many diverging opinions within each of their general doctrines. What follows is not a comprehensive analysis of all approaches, but an outline of key approaches, to serve as a springboard for further study. I hope that this simplified presentation does not blemish the truth and depth of this lofty topic.

A hallmark of a sincere *oved(et) Hashem* (servant of God) is a determination to constantly increase the meaning and vibrancy of his or her service of God. It is therefore worthwhile for such an individual to explore different perspectives of *avodat Hashem* developed by the *hakhmei ha-mesorah* (sages of the tradition). By exploring different forms of worship, an individual is better positioned to identify the form that energizes and empowers him or her to better serve God. We will begin by looking at sources portraying a man-centered view, then move to those who adopt a God-centered perspective, and lastly, we will explore two forms of synthesis found in later sources.

### For Us

One perspective maintains that worship of God is primarily "for us," namely the worshipers, not for God. This approach is clear in the well-known *mishnah* at the end

of *Makkot*: "R. Hananya ben Akashya says, '[God] wanted to give Israel merit, therefore, He gave them much Torah and *mitsvot*.'"<sup>7</sup> This view is also found in a passage from *Midrash Rabbah* that asks the rhetorical question, "Does God care if man slaughters an animal in the front of the neck or in the back?" The Midrash seems to accept the premise of this question, namely, that God does not care, and therefore offers the explanation that it matters not for God but for man: "The *mitsvot* were given [by God] only to enfranchise (*le-tsaref*) the creations."<sup>8</sup> Lastly, the Gemara records the following statement of R. Sheshet: "Does God need [the Temple *menorah*'s] light? For all forty years that *Benei Yisrael* travelled in the desert, they followed His light!"<sup>9</sup> Rather, [the *menorah*] is testimony to all the people of the world that God's presence dwells with the Jewish people."<sup>10</sup>

The chief medieval proponent of divine worship for man's sake is Rambam. For example, he understands that the prohibition against harlotry is intended to ensure that all people belong to a family, since children of harlotry are considered strangers to everyone. An additional reason for the prohibition is in order to limit the lusts and desires of men, and to reduce strife between men for one woman.<sup>11</sup> Both these reasons focus upon man himself, not God. Similarly, Rambam suggests that the commandment of *berit milah* (circumcision) is intended to limit the physical pleasure

of intercourse and counteract excessive lust.<sup>12</sup> In another context he explains that the reason for burning *ketoret*, or incense, in the Temple was to remove the odor of the slaughtered animals and preserve people's respect for the Temple.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, his proposed reason for the prohibition against eating pig is that it is a dirty and unhealthy animal.<sup>14</sup> Rambam believes that *mitsvot* are focused on their impact on man, meant to perfect the human intellect and enhance one's character traits. As he wrote in *Moreh*

*Nevochim*, "all the commandments and exhortations in the Pentateuch aim at controlling the physical impulses."<sup>15</sup> And in *Iggeret Teiman* ("Epistle to Yemen"), he wrote, "The true divine religion does not have a single positive or negative precept whose essence does not contain aspects that aid the human being in his striving for perfection."<sup>16</sup>

While Rambam fiercely rejects many of Rambam's utilitarian and contextual-

Radically different forms of worship emerge from the proponents of Jewish philosophy and Jewish mysticism, respectively.



From left, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the Ba'al ha-Tanya), and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

ized reasons for *mitsvot*, he too promotes a man-focused purpose of *avodat Hashem*. In his commentary to the *mitsvah* of *shiluh ha-ken* (sending away the mother bird),<sup>17</sup> Ramban writes that the reason for the *mitsvah* is for man to develop a more merciful nature. He then expands his discussion to all *mitsvot* and asserts that "the purpose of *mitsvot* is not for [God Himself]. Rather, the purpose is for man himself to avoid harm, evil beliefs, or disgraceful qualities, or to remember the miracles and wonders of the blessed Creator and to know the Name ... all [the *mitsvot*] are for our sake alone... and this is something agreed upon by all the sayings of our Rabbis." He explains that the *midrash* quoted above suggests that God gave the *mitsvot* only for the sake of developing and molding man. The word "*tsiruf*" (literally "formation") is used here in the same way regarding man as it is with regards to making a coin. Ramban's opinion is actually more complicated, though, as will be noted below.

Ritva, in his commentary to *Masekhet Kiddushin* seems to invoke a man-centered view in his explanation of the principle that "greater is the one who is commanded and performs than the one who is not commanded and performs."<sup>18</sup> Ritva writes, "The *mitsvot* are not for God's pleasure but rather for our own merit."<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Ritva states this explanation in the name of *Rabbeinu ha-Gadol*, which usually refers to Ramban. Considering the other statements of Ramban quoted in this article, this source becomes even more noteworthy.

Lastly, the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* in his *Shorashei ha-Mitsvot* ("Roots of the *Mitsvot*") often explains the *mitsvot* as they pertain to the betterment of man. To cite a few examples, he explains that the *mitsvah* of sanctifying firstborns ("*kiddush bechorot*") is meant to remind man that everything is God's and that man has nothing in this world other than that which God provides.<sup>20</sup> He further suggests that the purpose of the *mitsvot* surrounding the *korban*



*Pesah* is to remember the great miracles that God performed for the Jewish people in order to take them out of Egypt.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the goal of the *mitsvah* to sanctify Shabbat with words (“*kiddush Shabbat be-devarim*”) is to remember the greatness of the day and to instill faith in our hearts that God created the world.<sup>22</sup>

### For Him

In stark contrast to the ideas presented above, *Zohar* states very clearly that divine worship in this world is intended to create unifications of the *sefirot* (divine attributes): “And for all of [the *mitsvot*], we need to perform the action below in order to arouse above.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Moses is praised by Elijah because, “in every single commandment, your effort was to unite the blessed holy One and His *shekhinah*.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast, man’s negative actions cause negative effects in the upper realm: “[Sins] separate the Queen from the King, and King from the Queen. Thus He is not called One, for He is only called One when they are together in union. Woe to those sinners who cause separation above.”<sup>25</sup> In a particularly strong explication of this view, *Zohar* interprets the verse, “*Tenu oz le-Elokim*,” “Give strength to God,”<sup>26</sup> in the most literal sense: “When the Jewish People does improper deeds, *ki-ve-yakhhol* (as if this could be) they weaken the strength of God, and when they do good deeds they give strength and power to God, and this is what the verse says, ‘Give strength to God.’ With what? With good deeds.”<sup>27</sup>

Ba’al ha-Tanya advocates this position when he states that the greatest worship is “not only in order to cleave to Him, blessed is He, to quench the thirst of the soul thirsty for God... but rather, as is explained in *Tikkunei Zohar*... to unite [God] and His *Shekhinah*.”<sup>28</sup> He further argues in favor of such an approach in his *Sha’ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah*, “It is known to all that the purpose of creation is in order to reveal [God’s] kingship, for there is no king without a nation.”<sup>29</sup>

However, it is necessary to offer a minor caveat within this view. It must be made very clear that a distinction exists within the world of mysticism between God’s essence and the manifest aspect of God.<sup>30</sup> Any discussion predicated on man’s actions affecting God refers only to the manifest aspect of God; God’s essence cannot be affected by man. Even this duality, however, is more complex and is considered beyond human comprehension.<sup>31</sup>

The *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* seems to take this position as well. He writes, “The foundation of our holy faith is that our entire intention in all our blessings, prayers, and requests is only the One of the world, the single Master and endless One, blessed is He.” But he then makes a crucially important point:

However, we are not talking about the essence of God on the level that He is com-

pletely expanded and separate from the worlds ... It is only that after He showed us that His will is to connect to and be King over the worlds that our request is that He be King over the worlds. Furthermore, on the level of His essence, without connecting to the worlds, there is no space for Torah and *mitsvot* at all ... because all the deeds of man, be them good or bad, do not affect this sense at all, God forbid.<sup>32</sup>

Although Ramban, as quoted above, clearly adopts a man-focused view of *mitsvot*, he elsewhere hints to a different perspective. *Shemot* 29:46 states, “They shall know that I am Hashem, their God, Who took them out of the land of Egypt to rest My presence among them (*le-shakhni be-tokham*). I am Hashem, their God.” The commentators to this verse debate how to understand the *lamed* prefix of the word “*le-shakhni*.” Ramban rejects a number of explanations and endorses the view of Ibn Ezra: The *lamed* means “for the sake of.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Ramban argues, the Torah indicates that God took us out of Egypt in order that He dwell among us. Ramban then comments that “[Ibn Ezra] explained well, and, if so, there is a great secret in the matter. For according to the simple understanding of this verse, God’s dwelling in Israel is for human sake and not for divine sake, but [this verse] is similar to ‘Through you, Israel, God is glorified.’”<sup>34</sup> The verse thus says that God took *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt in order that He dwell among them, the emphasis being not on their gain, but rather on His. Admittedly this is not explicit in the verse, even according to Ibn Ezra’s reading, but it is nonetheless alluded to as a “great secret.”

This approach can also be found in later Hasidic sources. For example, R. Levi Yitshak of Berditchev wrote in his commentary on the Torah: “God, blessed is He, created the world in order that He have pleasure ... This pleasure comes from this-worldly things, from men.”<sup>35</sup>

### For Us and For Him

While I have outlined two conflicting approaches above, one need not consider these viewpoints as mutually exclusive, especially not from a mystical perspective. Although many philosophical authorities reject certain mystical doctrines, and some *mekubbalim* dismiss philosophical positions,<sup>36</sup> there are those that advocate for some form of synthesis. What follow are two different forms of synthesis. The first reconciles the different views by creating a two-tier structure. The second offers a blend of the seemingly different views and shows that they are, in fact, one.

R. Shlomo Elyashiv, the great Torah scholar and kabbalist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in his mag-

num opus, *Leshem Shevo ve-Ahlaham*, claims that Rambam’s view is entirely correct with regards to understanding God as transcendent, while the mystical doctrine of the *mekubbalim* speaks within the other, manifest, aspect of God.<sup>37,38</sup> In this way, he maintains the seemingly exclusive opinions by allowing them to function on different levels.

Ramban, as well, views these two approaches as not mutually exclusive. As noted above, Ramban clearly states that the purpose of *mitsvot* is for man and not for God, yet elsewhere he presents a God-focused view as his “great secret.” While his opinion requires further investigation and analysis, it is likely that Ramban operates on multiple levels. On the *peshat* (simple reading) level, he considers the *mitsvot* to be for man’s sake, but, on the deeper “*sod*” level, *avodat Hashem* is for God. The two views are entirely different, but Ramban seems to comfortably adopt a multilayered worldview. Although it is purely speculative, it is possible to suggest that these layers of Ramban are similar to the claim of the *Leshem*.

A second form of synthesis is a profound idea found in the writings of R. Abraham Isaac Kook. Binyamin Ish Shalom of Beit Morasha of Jerusalem presents R. Kook’s discussion of the struggle between freedom of the self and subjugation to the Divine.<sup>39</sup> Ish Shalom shows how R. Kook often stresses his loyalty to the importance of human will and the human self, yet other times speaks of complete subjugation to the Divine. He further argues that the complete picture of R. Kook’s view not only contains no contradictions but actually reflects a stunning attempt at synthesis. Freedom, writes R. Kook, is for one “to be true to his inner self, to the spiritual quality of God’s image within him, and in such a quality he can consider his life as worthy and purposeful.”<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, he explains further that “man is destined to rise to recognition of his will, to self-consciousness, to the highest perception of happiness in doing his own will as the will of his Maker, for his will is none other than his Maker’s will” [italics in the original].<sup>41</sup> He explains that the human will is “a single spark of the blazing flame of the great Will in all of being, the manifestation of the will of the Master of the World, blessed be He.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, R. Kook explains, when a person develops his own self (within the guidelines of Torah and Halakhah), the divine will that is expressed within man is further developed. And when one subjugates himself to the divine will he truly finds the deepest level of his own will. This unique perspective sheds light on our discussion as well. We can propose that acting “for us” is acting “for Him,” and acting “for Him”

is acting “for us.” As the Mishnah states, “make His will your will in order that your will become His will.”<sup>43</sup>

It is often difficult to maintain a constant excitement and vibrancy within one’s *avodat Hashem* amidst the repetition of daily routine. Thankfully, and not by chance, Judaism contains a variety of different outlooks. At times the “for us” type of worship will take the stage and, at other times, the “for Him” may be featured. For every person this combination will form itself differently and it is our challenge to each find our own synthesis of views. By developing both deeper understandings and appreciation of a wider scope of opinions a person can attempt to have a constant flow of substance and stimulation giving life to his or her *avodat Hashem*.

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1 See *Kiddushin* 31a.

2 *Shemot* 24:7.

3 *Ibid*.

4 It is important to remember that *Benei Yisrael* were praised specifically for putting “*na’aseh*,” we will do, before “*nishma*,” we will listen (*Shabbat* 88a), ostensibly implying that commitment to *avodat Hashem* exists on its own, with or without understanding. Divine service is enhanced by understanding but not hinged entirely on it.

5 This is in addition to the inherent value of knowing and understanding these issues as a fulfillment of the *mitsvah* to study and understand the Torah.

6 Not all halakhic authorities agree to the project of rationalizing the *mitsvot*. For example, R. Jacob ben Asher states in *Tur, Yoreh De’ah* 181 that “we do not need to search for the reasons of *mitsvot* because they are commandments of the King upon us even if we do not know their reason.” Many authorities, such as Rambam and *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, however, seemed to invest a great deal of time into understanding the *mitsvot*. This question is ostensibly connected to the debate in *Sanhedrin* 21a as to whether or not “*doreshin ta’ama de-ker*,” “we extrapolate the reasons of verses.”

7 *Makkot* 3:16. (All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.)

8 *Bereshit Rabbah* 44:1. A very similar statement appears in *Midrash Tanhuma, Shemini*, chapter 8.

9 This translation follows Tosafot’s understanding of this passage. Tosafot record another view, however, that the question is not referring to God but rather to the *kohanim* performing the *avodah* in the Temple. In other words, the Gemara is asking, “Did Aharon really need the light of the *menorah* for his service? The *shekhinah* itself provided light for all forty years in the desert!”

10 *Shabbat* 22b.

11 *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:49.

12 *Ibid*.

13 *Ibid* 3:45.

14 *Ibid*. 3:48.

15 *Ibid* 3:8.

16 Rambam in *Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:2) defines serving God out of

love as “doing the truth because it is truth.” A similar expression appears in his *Peirush ha-Mishnayot* (Sanhedrin 10:1). This does not seem to be the model we are presenting for Rambam here (nor does it fit exactly with the “for Him” model). Rather, this seems to be a third view that advocates doing the *mitsvot* because they are true. Ostensibly the assumption is that truth is intrinsically valuable; see Michael J. Zimmerman, “Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Online: Winter 2012 Edition), available at: plato.stanford.edu.

17 See *Devarim* 22:6-7 and commentary of Ramban, ad loc.

18 *Kiddushin* 31a.

19 Ritva to *Kiddushin* 31a, s.v. *de-amar*. It is unclear how to understand what exactly “for our merit” (“*li-zekhuteinu*”) means. It could mean that man merits reward in this world and/or in the next world, or it could mean something along the lines of Ramban above, namely, that man benefits by developing better character and faith in God.

20 *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* 18.

21 *Ibid.* 5.

22 *Ibid.* 31.

23 *Zohar* 3:105a.

24 *Zohar* 3:119a.

25 *Zohar* 3:16b. The King and Queen refer to different *sefirot*.

26 *Tehillim* 65:35.

27 *Zohar* 2:32b.

28 *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, 10.

29 *Tanya, Sha'ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah*, 7.

30 This is more or less stated in *Tikkunei Zohar* 70 and explicated in the *Asarah Kelalim* of the Gra: “A great principle in Torah is that all that the *mekubbalim* (kabbalists) have said and all that the Torah says is God’s will, providence, and actions and they did not speak, [God forbid], about His physical essence at all.” (*Kelal* 1).

31 R.A.I. Kook explains this concept in a fascinating and insightful way: “Thus one discerns within the absolute perfection of Divinity two paradoxical features. The first is that God is absolutely perfect. It is impossible for there to exist, whether in this reality or in imagination, a perfection greater than His. This aspect of Divine perfection cannot become more perfect for there is nothing beyond it; there are no further levels to attain. And yet, this excellence conceals a deficiency that mars the very perfection that it purports. Perfection that lacks the possibility of becoming even more perfect is no longer completely flawless, for it is missing something. It is perfection minus one small detail, the experience of dynamic perfecting. Consequently, Di-

vinity must also possess this latter capability. This second feature, the possibility of positive transformation, when applied to human beings, has certain fulfillments and gratifications and even superiority over its more distinguished counterpart, the supreme (though static) expression of absolute perfection. There is a particular type of exquisite joy that comes from self-improvement, and every soul longs for its sweetness. The exhilaration of personal transformation, of ‘ascending from strength to strength,’ must also be a divine satisfaction. It is impossible for the Creator to lack this virtue.” (*Orot ha-Kodesh* 2; transl. by Sarah Yehudit Schneider in Sarah Schneider, *You Are What You Hate: A Spiritually Productive Approach to Enemies* (Jerusalem: Still Small Voice, 2009).)

32 *Sefer Nefesh ha-Hayyim* 2:4. The Tanya also addresses these two levels. He speaks about God as the *mesavev kol almin* - “the One Who surrounds all worlds.” He surrounds all worlds, He is removed from them, and “everything is before Him as nothing.” And He is the “*memale kol almin*” - “the One Who fills all worlds,” and thereby He manifests in this world. See *Tanya* 3-4.

33 Ramban to *Shemot* 29:46. s.v. *le-shakhni*.

34 *Yish'ayahu* 49:3.

35 *Kedushat Levi* to *Bereshit* 2:6, s.v. *ve-eid*.

36 See Daniel C. Matt, “The Mystic and the Mizvot” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, vol. 1, ed. by Arthur Green (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), 367-404.

37 This is not to say that Rambam himself would agree to that claim. Many philosophers reject mystical doctrines, but many mystics accept aspects of philosophical perspectives and add to them.

38 This idea surfaces in a number of his writings. One explication of it appears in *Likutim* at the end of *Hakdamot u-She'arim*.

39 Binyamin Ish Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak Hacohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 108-113.

40 Ish-Shalom, 101.

41 Ish-Shalom, 111.

42 *Ibid.*, 111.

43 *Avot* 2:4.



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# Patriarchs and Sacrifices: The Philosophical Backing to Prayer

BY: SARAH ROBINSON

Prayer is a core foundation to Jewish existence. Thrice daily, individual Jews bind into a community, praying for the most basic, profound, and dear aspects of life. But why is Jewish law so particularistic about when prayer can be said? Why are the laws pertaining to prayer so rigid, even dictating the acceptable time-frame for the *tefillot*? How does institutionalized prayer allow for individuality?

A disagreement between R. Yosi the son of R. Hanina and R. Yehoshua ben Levi regarding the establishment of prayer offers fertile ground to answer all of these questions.<sup>1</sup> R. Yosi argues, "*tefillot avot tiknum*," that prayer was established by the Patriarchs. R. Yehoshua ben Levi argues, "*tefillot ke-neged temidin tiknum*," that the prayers correspond to the sacrifices offered in the Temple. The Gemara then brings a Beraita to support each opinion.

R. Yosi, who holds "*avot tiknum*," is supported by *pesukim* that hint to a point in each of the Patriarchs' careers when they prayed. Following the destruction of Sodom, Abraham returned to his usual place and "stood (*amad*)".<sup>2</sup> Considering other uses of the word "stood," Abraham's standing must have been a form of prayer. Next, Isaac went to the field "to converse (*la-suah*)" before nightfall as Rebecca was arriving.<sup>3</sup> The Gemara explains that "to converse" refers to prayer. Last, Jacob "encountered (*va-yifga*)" the place where he spent the night while journeying to Haran.<sup>4</sup> The Gemara explains that "encountered" also refers to prayer. These correlations prove that the Patriarchs each engaged in prayer during different portions of the day.

The Gemara also offers support for R. Yehoshua ben Levi's opinion of "*ke-neged temidin tiknum*" -- that the Men of the Great Assembly<sup>5</sup> instituted times for verbal prayer to correspond to the times for the daily sacrificial offerings in the Temple. Because the morning sacrifice could be offered until midday, our morning prayers can be said until midday. Because the afternoon sacrifice could be offered until evening, our afternoon prayer can be said until evening. Because the remaining limbs and intestines from sacrifices were burned all night, our evening prayer can be said all night. Thus, according to R. Yehoshua ben Levi, Jews pray thrice daily within these time constraints to mirror the sequence of communal sacrifices offered in the Temple.

Thus, the Gemara seems to set a sharp dichotomy. Each opinion is bolstered by a teaching, thereby supporting both the notion that our prayers are a reflection of our Patriarch's relationship with the Almighty and that they are a replacement for Temple sacrifices.

At first glance, the debate seems to be over fact. Either the source of prayer stems from the Patriarchs or from the sacrifices. However, I would like to argue that the source of contention is a sharp philosophical debate about the nature of prayer itself -- whether prayer is best accomplished through an individual's idiosyncratic style like the Patriarchs or through a structured ritualistic model like the sacrifices.

R. Yosi's "*avot*" perspective suggests that prayer should be idiosyncratic, inspired and shaped by the one praying. The Patriarchs each prayed, albeit in a different way. Abraham "stood," Isaac "conversed," and Jacob "encountered." While each word connotes a mode of prayer, the key is that each Patriarch prayed in accordance with his personality.

Abraham was a maverick, the champion of monotheism and morality in a world of immoral dysfunction. Merely "standing" was a sign of his life work; the fact that he stood alone indicates strong self-confidence. Abraham "stood"<sup>6</sup> in debate with God over the future of Sodom; Abraham's audacity to fight on behalf of those who deserved a defense attorney is an exemplification of Abraham's sharp moral compass. Perhaps Abraham's mere "standing" presence not only refers to Abraham's mode of prayer, but also to his lifestyle.

Isaac lived a quiet life. While his existence ensured the continuity of the Jewish people, Isaac failed to proactively dictate his own life path. During the Binding of Isaac, Abraham intended to sacrifice him, seemingly with his full consent.<sup>7</sup> He was not involved in finding his wife Rebecca -- his father's servant went on that mission. In fact, Isaac's travels were limited to the boundaries of *Erets Yisrael*. Unlike his father who forever changed the makeup of humanity through active engagement with the world around him,<sup>8</sup> Isaac's most critical moments occurred in quiet one-on-one conversations within his nuclear family, such as when he gave blessings to his twin sons.<sup>9</sup> Thus, defining his prayer in terms of his "conversation" seems appropriate.

Jacob's life was turbulent. Jacob was

cajoled into stealing his brother Esau's blessing.<sup>10</sup> Jacob was then forced to flee from Esau.<sup>11</sup> He was tricked into marrying his intended wife's sister.<sup>12</sup> Then, in order to wed the love of his life, he was forced to work for another seven years.<sup>13</sup> With four wives and eleven children, Jacob was forced to flee yet again.<sup>14</sup> Worse, his sons treated each other with shocking disrespect, even throwing Joseph into a pit, hoping he would passively die alone.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Jacob had every reason to seek help in the striking, moving, and profound fashion of "encountering." The intensity of his prayer was proportional to the intensity of his life upheavals.

On the flipside, R. Yehoshua ben Levi champions the "*temidin*" approach -- that prayer is best accomplished through set ritual.

There are many advantages to this approach. Although set prayer could easily become a rote bore, the "*temidin*" approach ensures that individuals will pray on a regular basis. Even the word "*temidin*" stems from the Hebrew word "*tamid*," meaning "always." While most people will encounter points in their lives that demand heartfelt prayer, inspiration is inconsistent. The "*temidin*" approach asks all Jews to have a consistent conversation with the Almighty, regardless of whether they are in the mood to pray.

Further, the "*temidin*" form gives a set structure to encounter the Almighty. Jews are meant to pray three times a day with a set text mandated by the Men of the Great Assembly. Instead of relying on every person's dreams and desires to come to the fore, the prayer text explicitly tells Jews what deserves a prayer -- like the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of the Rabbinical Courts. Thus, the pre-set text for prayer leads to a more thorough relationship with the Almighty.

In sum, the requirement to pray can be accomplished like the *avot's* prayer -- a time to cathartically pour out one's deepest life desires to the Almighty, an opportunity to search one's innermost core, to ask for one's deepest desires. However, the form of prayer could more easily mimic the sacrifices -- the predetermined ritual, the communal obligation, the constant demand.

The Gemara concludes, "*avot tiknum vi-asmikhinhu rabbanan a-korbanot*," meaning that the concept of prayer stems from the Patriarchs but the structure reflects the

sacrifices. This is a spectacular harmonization of the two views. Instead of valuing one opinion over the other, the Gemara's arbitration proves that both are necessary for the fulfillment of Jewish prayer -- somehow, Jewish prayer would be incomplete without the ability to purge the individual's thoughts within the set structure. Thus, this melding of the two halves of the dichotomy represents the ideal philosophy of Jewish prayer: an idiosyncratic though structured supplication to the Almighty.

*Sarah Robinson is a junior at SCW majoring in Jewish Studies and English Literature.*

1 *Berakhot* 26b. All translations are my own.

2 Genesis 19:27.

3 *Ibid* 24:63.

4 *Ibid*. 28:11.

5 Rashi to *Berakhot* 26b, s.v. *ke-neged temidin tiknum*.

6 In proving that Abraham prayed in the morning, the Gemara references Genesis 19:27. The Bible recounts the same word, "stood," in the preceding chapter when Abraham "stood" in debate with God over the future of Sodom. In this paragraph, I am referring to 18:22.

7 Genesis 22 records the Binding of Isaac. Strikingly, Abraham is the protagonist of the story with Isaac speaking only in 22:7, asking, "Here is the fire and the wood, and where is the sheep to offer?" Isaac is otherwise silent throughout the encounter, even when his father Abraham binds him to the altar. Isaac's silence and compliance imply his consent.

8 Genesis 12:5. The verse notes that Abraham took Lot and Sarah and their property and "the souls they made in Haran." Rashi (ad loc., s.v. *asher asu bi-Haran*) explains that Abraham and Sarah converted the men and women of Haran to Judaism. These converts joined Abraham in his travel to Israel.

9 Genesis 27:1-27:40.

10 Genesis 27. In this chapter, Rebecca overhears that Isaac plans to give Esau a blessing. In order to ensure that Jacob would receive the blessing instead, Rebecca initially asked Jacob to "please go" (27:9) and gather two goats. After Jacob raised a pragmatic issue -- that Isaac would discern that Jacob tricked him -- Rebecca firmly dismisses his concern. Rebecca retorts, "walk and go" (27:12), without the "please." Thus, Jacob was cajoled into usurping the elder blessing from his twin brother.

11 Genesis 27:40.

12 *Ibid*. 29:25.

13 *Ibid*. 29:27.

14 *Ibid*. 31:2.

15 *Ibid*. 37:20.



# An Interview with Rabbi Ronald Schwarzbarg

BY: CHESKY KOPEL

*Note to readers: Rabbi Ronald Schwarzbarg has served as the director of the Morris and Gertrude Bienenfeld Department of Jewish Career Development and Placement for Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future since 2005. After serving as associate rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Rabbi Schwarzbarg then became rabbi of Congregation Ahavas Achim in Highland Park, NJ. He has served as co-chair of the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Middlesex County and as chair of the Rabbinic Cabinet of the United Jewish Communities from 2005 to 2007.<sup>1</sup>*

*What do you love most about your position?*

I am really one of the luckiest people in the world because I've had two great careers: first as a pulpit rabbi, and now I'm able to take twenty-five years of rabbinic experience and share it with my colleagues. If you drive 49.7 miles each way to work, and over the George Washington Bridge, you have to love what you are doing. I think that helping rabbis find jobs, which is my primary responsibility, is probably one of the most gratifying things that I do, but I also help them with their contracts and when there are issues in congregations between the lay leadership and the rabbi, and being able to help in those situations is equally gratifying. Our office doesn't take a side when we get involved; we mediate. If we represented only the rabbi, the communities would say that we are biased towards the rabbis. If we were to take the side of the communities, obviously our rabbis would not feel like they have a voice. So we make it very clear to both sides that, when there is an issue, we mediate. We don't represent.

*In the process of setting up young leaders for positions in avodat ha-kodesh, do you usually deal with institutions and communities that already trust YU, or do you need to cultivate relationships as well?*

I think it's really a combination of both. YU has had different eras, and people have treated this office differently both externally and internally. I can't really speak to the past, but I'd rather speak to what we do now. What we do now is a very open, transparent process. There are no favorite sons and no favorite positions. Everything is completely open to all rabbis, and everybody can apply to any position that they are interested in. The communities would like us to screen, and we do screen, mean-

ing that we do have conversations with all the rabbis we send out, and try to make them understand whether this is going to be a good date or a bad date, and try to discourage people from going on bad dates. However, when a rabbi tells us that he is interested even though we don't think it's the best *shiddukh* in the world, we send a résumé, and we follow our process of being open and transparent.

*But*

But in general, placement is about trust. And one of the things we try to do is visit every community that we are working with, because you can't really develop trust over a phone. Trust is eyeball to eyeball. And when you sit with a search committee and they get to see who our office staff is, and they can put a face to it, then when you have subsequent conversations with them, it just makes everything fall into place. So you build relationships by shaking hands and sitting for a few hours in a shul with a search committee and by getting to know the people. And when you go to meet a search committee at night, I can spend the day going to the day schools and the other institutions that are in that community in order to get a feel for the community. This enables us to understand better what they're looking for, and to understand the larger community with a much better perspective.

*How has your previous experience as a pulpit rabbi affected your approach to this assignment?*

That's an excellent question.

I think it would be very difficult to place people if you weren't coming from the background of the pulpit, because I understand the job. I understand what it takes to be a pulpit rabbi: the challenges, the inspirational parts, the deflating parts. Like in any job, there are wonderful parts of it and there are some difficult parts. Sitting down with a candidate and making them understand that it's not all about *paskening* Halakhah and giving *shi'urim*, and that

there are very challenging human problems.

*People are people, and they get into all kinds of human entanglements during the course of life, and their first defense is the rabbi. So I think I understand what these rabbis are going to be dealing with and what they do deal with. That, also, by the way, goes back to our conversation about trust. The very fact that the community who's dealing with me knows that I was a pulpit rabbi gives them some trust that I understand what I'm bringing to them.*

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*Are the CJF and RIETS (under both of which Rabbi Schwarzbarg's position is listed) on the same page about priorities in rabbinic placement?*

Not only are they on the same page, but we discuss this all the time. One of the most recent conversations that we've been having between my office, which is located here at

the CJF, and with Rabbi Reiss, Rabbi Penner, and Rabbi Bronstein at RIETS, is about what more we can do to help prepare our *musmakhim* to present themselves in the best possible light. I'm sure you realize that being a pulpit rabbi today is not just about how much Gemara you know, and how well you can teach, and how well you can *pasken*; many of the congregations out there are looking for a CFO; they are looking for a very presentable person who can articulate a vision, carry out that vision, and relate to a much larger and broader world -- and we want to make sure that we are keeping up with the times. We want to make sure that our rabbis that we are putting out of our *semikhah* program can speak to modernity and speak to current issues in the best possible way. And RIETS is very receptive to that. Our *semikhah* students, have very, very busy academic lives and lives in general, and it's very hard to continue to squeeze more and more into their lives, but we have to keep doing it.

*Have there been changes in rabbinic training over the years based on the developing needs of communities?*

Yes. I think the previous answer spoke to that a lot. But I think the answer to that is, when we wake up tomorrow morning, the world is different than it was when we went to sleep. That's how fast the world changes today because of technology. Keeping up with that pace is hard for us as individuals, whether you are going into law, medicine, accounting practices, or finance, and I think the same is true of the rabbinate. The world keeps changing, and if we don't deal with that, our rabbis will not be in the best position because they won't be able to converse about what the current generation is thinking about. Remember: this office doesn't just deal with *musmakhim* coming out of school, but also with our *musmakhim* that are in the field already. So we have a continuing rabbinic education program as well. We have to talk about issues that are confronting our society.

A second example is the Odyssey generation. When I grew up, we went from adolescence to adulthood. Today, people are on an odyssey, on a journey that can take them five, ten, fifteen, twenty years before they "have to be an adult," and decide who they want to be, how they want to live their life, and what they want to do for a living. Again, a rabbi has to be able to deal with this generation. He has to understand why





those things are, how we got to this point, and how we should deal with this current generation. So we have to continuously bring in people like Dr. Pelcovitz and other speakers for our *semikhah* students in order to expose them to trends in our generation.

*Do you find that there are differences between the needs of Jewish communities in the Northeast and those in the South, Midwest, and West?*

In general geographic terms, no. I think what people are looking for in Denver, CO is pretty much what people are looking for in Highland Park, NJ or East Brunswick, NJ, but what I would say is, if you are looking at specific towns or cities, there may be particular needs. There are some cities where you have to be a much more serious *talmid hakham* than in others. That's not to say that we shouldn't always produce *talmidei hakhamim*; that is very important. Sometimes you have a group of people who care very much about maintaining their Orthodox synagogue but sophistication of learning and knowledge may not be what it is in another place. So I wouldn't say it's geographical. I would say it's more location to location.

*What should a pulpit rabbi's attitude be towards his community? And by that I mean, what should his balance be between advocating for change when he sees a need for change, and accepting the community where it is?*

A rabbi first has to build trust in his community before he can make any changes. When a rabbi builds trust between himself and the congregation, and establishes a relationship, then he can begin to elevate his community in ways that he feels are appropriate to his community. I think that all of us who are bright, thinking people do not believe we should remain stagnant; we have to continue to grow. And that's what a rabbi's job is – to inspire growth, not force it, not demand it. Whenever you force or demand it you're going to get rejected, you're going to get pushback. The rabbi needs to live a life where he, through his own behavior and actions and family life, is inspiring, and collaboratively builds his institution in an inspirational way that will make people want to grow.

1 Adapted, with modification, from the Center for the Jewish Future's website: [www.yu.edu/cjf](http://www.yu.edu/cjf).

## The Role of the *Sheliah Tsibbur*: A Historical Perspective

BY: DOVI NADEL

Long before Jews began to pray in a *beit keneset*, they had a *sheliah tsibbur* (messenger of the congregation). In fact, the concept of a *sheliah tsibbur* spans back to the time of the prophets. Yet, the connotation of this term and the function of this role has not always been the same. It is only after the destruction of the second *Beit ha-Mikdash* that the *sheliah tsibbur* took on its current, formal position within the *beit keneset*. Understanding the historical evolution of the role of the *sheliah tsibbur* is crucial to understanding the purpose of this central position in *tefillah*.

In the Midrashic narrative, the first recorded *sheliah tsibbur* is God Himself. The Midrash tells us that God appeared to Moshe on Har Sinai, "wrapped in a tallit like a *sheliah tsibbur*," in order to teach him the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. While on the mountain, God not only presents Moshe with the words of this *tefillah*, but also teaches Moshe through example how this *tefillah* is meant to be performed. God himself (garbed as a *sheliah tsibbur*) tells Moshe, "you [Moshe] perform this order of prayer before me, and I shall forgive them."<sup>1</sup> In other words, God teaches Moshe that the *sheliah tsibbur* is the one who must lead this prayer on behalf of *Benei Yisrael* if they are to be forgiven. Significantly, it is God who not only teaches us, but also demonstrates to us how to act as the *sheliah tsibbur*.

Many leaders throughout Tanakh take upon themselves the mantle of the *sheliah tsibbur* as well. When *Benei Yisrael* are threatened by the *Pelishtim*, they turn to Shemuel, asking him to pray on their be-

half. Shemuel replies, "Gather all of Israel to *Mitspah*, and I will pray to God on your behalf."<sup>2</sup> Shelomo, too, upon the inauguration of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, offers a lengthy prayer to God requesting of God that He "listen to the prayers that your servant prays toward this place [the *Beit ha-Mikdash*]."<sup>3</sup>

The very term "*sheliah tsibbur*" may be based on a *pasuk* in

*Yirmiyahu*. Dis-  
traught after the  
destruction of  
the *Beit ha-Mikdash*  
and the murder of Geda-  
liah, the people of Israel turn to Yirmiyahu, asking that he pray to God to give them direction: "Pray on our behalf to God... Whether it [the response we receive] be good, or whether it be evil, we will hearken to the voice of the Lord our God, to whom we send thee (*sholekh im otekha elav*)."<sup>4</sup> As attested to by the word-

ing, the people send Yirmiyahu before them as a *shaliah* – as a messenger with a mission to retrieve the word of God. Unable or unworthy to offer prayer, or communicate with God on their own, the people would send a *navi*, somebody whose own standing was worthy of God's attention. The *navi* confronted God based on his own merit, not on the merit of the community that he represented.

The development of formalized *tefillah* concretized the role of the *sheliah tsibbur*. There is ample evidence, from as early as the era of the second *Beit ha-Mikdash*, of the existence of the *beit keneset*. Historian Leo Landman explains that, in attempting to involve the general populace in the Levite-specific prayer services in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, a system of *ma'amadot* (lit. "shifts") was set up. Essentially, all Israelites were divided into twenty-four groups. Each group received a time allotment for when they were expected to assist

in the service at the *Beit ha-Mikdash*. Yet, it was not feasible that everyone in the group could travel; therefore, each *ma'amad*, when its time came, would send only a few representatives. Those who were not sent were required to gather and read specific portions of the Torah and other texts instead. After the second *Beit ha-Mikdash* was destroyed, these places of *ma'amad* were transformed into locations of more formalized *tefillah*.<sup>5</sup>

As the *beit keneset* took on a more concrete form, so did the role of the *sheliah tsibbur*. One of the earliest mentions of the *sheliah tsibbur*<sup>6</sup>

in rabbinic literature occurs in *Masekhet Ta'anit*.

The *mishnayot* there describe the procedure for prayers conducted on a day of communal fast for rain: "How were the last seven days of fasting conducted? They used to bring out the Ark into the open space in the town ... they stood up in prayer, sending down before the ark an old man, well versed in prayer, one that had children and whose house was empty, so that he might be whole-hearted in the prayer."<sup>7</sup> Without *nevi'im*, the community appointed a new type of *shaliah* – the righteous old man. The community

clearly invested in the persona of this *sheliah tsibbur*. Yet, what was the purpose and function of this newly transformed role? Was this *zaken* (old man) expected to be a mirror image of the *navi*? Was this *shaliah* expected to have sufficient personal merit to save the community through his own *tefillot* like the *navi* had done formerly?

In some instances, rabbinic literature seems to answer this question affirmatively. Many *Tanna'im* and *Amora'im* were well known for saving their communities with their personal *tefillot*.<sup>8</sup> Most famous amongst these is, perhaps, the *tanna* Honi ha-Me'aggel (lit. "the circle drawer") who, praying on behalf of *Benei Yisrael*, said, "O Lord of the world, Your children have turned their faces to me, for I am like a member of your household (*ben bayit*) ... I will not stir until You have pity on Your children."<sup>9</sup> Honi's prayer was clearly founded on utilizing his own merit (and

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shaliah but the entire  
congregation as  
well.





chutzpah) to save *Benei Yisrael*.

There is another *mishnah*, however, which presents a very different notion of the role of the *sheliah tsibbur* in rabbinic literature. It is written in *Berakhot*: "If one makes a mistake in his prayer, it is an evil sign for him, and if he is the *sheliah tsibbur* it is an evil sign for those who have appointed him (i.e., the community), because a man's agent is equivalent to himself (*sheluhoh shel adam kemoto*)." The *mishnah* then continues, "It was related of R. Hanina ben Dosa that he used to pray for the sick and say, 'This one will live, this one will die.' They said to him, 'How do you know?' He replied, 'If my prayers come out fluently, I know that he is accepted (i.e., will survive), but if not, then I know that he is ruined (i.e., will die).'"<sup>10</sup> Here, the *sheliah tsibbur* is not presented as an individual, but, as the *mishnah* says, "*sheluhoh shel adam kemoto*," he takes the place of the entire community. He stands before God, empowered not by his own merit, but by the merit of the community.<sup>11</sup> The reason that the *Mishnah* chooses to recount a story of R. Hanina ben Dosa, after discussing the role of the *shaliah*, is clear. Like R. Hanina, the leader of prayer must realize that he stands before God not as himself but as the embodiment of the community. Thus, the repercussions of a mistake in prayer are enormous, affecting not just the *shaliah* but the entire congregation as well.

It follows that while it is praiseworthy to have a *sheliah tsibbur* who is meritorious, it is perhaps not absolutely necessary. The *shaliah* is granted his importance by the community, making his personal merits less significant. A careful reading of a passage in Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* seems to echo this point, "One does not appoint a *sheliah tsibbur* unless he is the most prominent in the congregation (*gadol she-ba-tsibbur*) in terms of his wisdom and deeds; and if he is elderly, that is praiseworthy and one should try to ensure that the *sheliah tsibbur* has a pleasant voice and he is accustomed to reading *tefillot*."<sup>12</sup> These requirements, Rambam writes, are "*meshubah*" (praiseworthy); however, they are not necessary. *Tur* states this even more clearly, "The Talmud did not intend this [the character traits listed for the *sheliah tsibbur*] to be a real obligation, but rather it is preferable [that he possess these traits]."<sup>13</sup> The *sheliah tsibbur's* character does not have to be flawless because he does not represent himself; he represents the community.

If the *sheliah tsibbur* is a replacement for the entire community, one could perhaps suggest that he has the ability to fulfill the entire congregation's obligation to pray. R. Gamli'el adopts this stance in an exchange with the *Hakhamim* that takes place during one of the first generations following the destruction of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*.

The Gemara in *Rosh ha-Shanah* records this crucial debate: "The *Hakhamim* stated that just as the *sheliah tsibbur* is under obligation [to say his own *tefillah*], so too every individual has the obligation [to recite his own prayers]. R. Gamli'el, however, says that the *sheliah tsibbur* clears the whole congregation of their obligations [to pray an individual prayer]."<sup>14</sup> One The Tosefta cited in the Gemara then records a discussion between R. Gamli'el and the *Hakhamim* regarding their respective opinions:

They [the *Hakhamim*] said to Rabban Gamli'el: "If your view is correct, then why does the congregation [first] say the *Amidah* prayer? [Rather, the *sheliah tsibbur* should just say the prayer and fulfill everyone's obligation.]" [R. Gamli'el] said to them, "[the purpose of the individual's prayer] is to give the *sheliah tsibbur* time to prepare his prayer." R. Gamli'el then

said to them, "If your view is correct, then why does the reader go down [and stand] before the Ark [i.e. why do we need a *sheliah tsibbur*]?" They replied, "So as to fulfill the obligation of he who is not familiar [with the prayers]." He [R. Gamli'el] said to them, "Just as [the *sheliah tsibbur*] clears one who is not familiar [with his prayer], so he clears one who is familiar [with his prayers]."<sup>15</sup>

This debate is crucial in defining what the early *Tanna'im*, the molders of rabbinic *tefillah*, thought about the newly revised establishment of *tefillah* and the role of the *sheliah tsibbur* within it. R. Gamli'el and the *Hakhamim* represent two distinct perspectives on the purpose of this "new *sheliah tsibbur*," wrapped in its new context of a more structured prayer service. R. Gamli'el seems to have been the historical purist. For R. Gamli'el, the "new *sheliah tsibbur*" was no different from the *sheliah tsibbur* of the past. *Tefillah*, according to R. Gamli'el, despite formal changes, remained community focused. Thus, the *tefillat ha-yahid* (the prayer of the individual) was merely a way of ensuring that the *sheliah tsibbur* had the ability to properly "prepare his *tefillah*."<sup>16</sup> Personal prayer did become a part of our tradition, but the focus of our prayers remained communal.

The *Hakhamim* on the other hand, promoted a greater revolution in the realm of *tefillah*. With the destruction of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, *tefillah* had undergone a major transformation. Exile had caused prayer, by necessity, to lose its communal nature. Sensing this transformation in the nature of *tefillah*, the *Hakhamim* downplayed the traditional role of the *sheliah tsibbur*. No longer was the *sheliah tsibbur* the representative of the entire community. Rather, he was the representative of those who could not pray on their own. *Tefillah* had undergone a shift – and with it the role of the *sheliah tsibbur* had changed as well.

One aspect of the role of the *shaliah*, however, has not changed. The *shaliah* – whether a *navi* or a *zaken* – always has and always will feel inadequate, unprepared, and terrified when approaching his duties as the "messenger of the congregation." How can he not feel this way? Just one mistake may determine "who will live and who will die."<sup>17</sup> The

task is daunting. Thus, standing before the congregation, the *shaliah* hesitantly beseeches God to don His *tallit* and act as a teacher once again:

I ask God to grant me the gift of speech,  
That I may sing His praise among people,  
And utter chants concerning his actions,  
A man may prepare his thoughts in his mind,  
But the power of speech comes from the Lord.<sup>18</sup>

*Dovi Nadel is a sophomore at YC, and is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser.*

1 This *midrash*, expounding upon *Shemot* 34:5, appears in *Rosh ha-Shanah* 17a. It is cited in an essay by Gerald Blidstein entitled "Sheliah Tzibbur: Historical and Phenomenological Observations," *Tradition* 12:1 (Summer 1971): 69-77.

2 I *Shemuel* 7:5. All translations are my own rendering unless indicated otherwise.

3 I *Melakhim* 8:29.

4 *Yirmiyahu* 42:2-6. See Blidstein, 76. Blidstein's translation.

5 Leo Landman, *The Cantor: An Historic Perspective* (New York, NY: Yeshiva University, 1972), 4.

6 The word *hazzan* appears many times in rabbinic literature (see, for example, *Makkot* 3:12 and *Sotah* 7:7-8). But the *hazzan* in rabbinic literature is not the *sheliah tsibbur*. Rather he more closely resembles our *gabbai* (functionary).

7 *Ta'anit* 2:1-2.

8 See the third chapter of *Masekhet Ta'anit* for more examples, including that of Nakdimon ben Guryon on 20a and R. Eliezer on 25b.

9 *Ta'anit* 3:8.

10 *Berakhot* 5:5.

11 See Blidstein, 71.

12 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Tefillah*, 8:11.

13 *Tur, Orah Hayyim* 53.

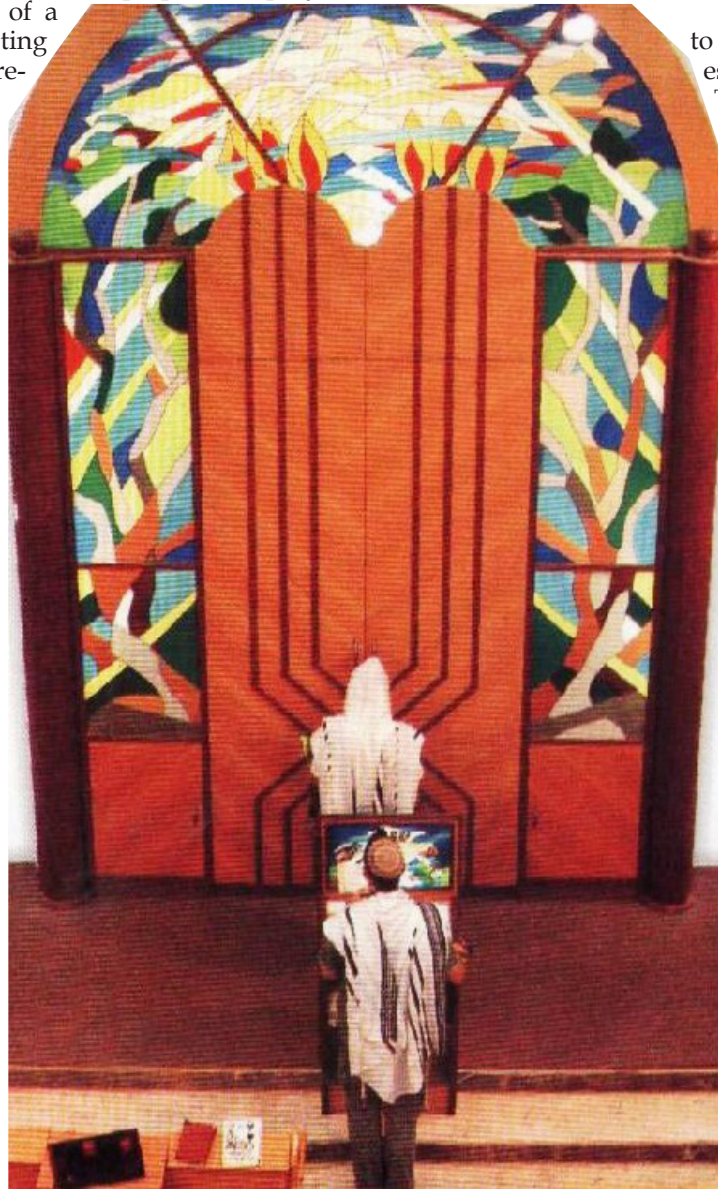
14 *Rosh ha-Shanah* 34a. Translation from Soncino Talmud, with my added clarifications.

15 *Rosh ha-Shanah* 34b-35a. Translation from Soncino Talmud, with my added clarifications.

16 *Rosh ha-Shanah* 34b.

17 *Berakhot* 5:5.

18 Prayer recited during *Musaf* of the *Yamim Nora'im*. Translation from Landman, vii.





# Between Spontaneity and Structure: Two Models of Prayer

BY: GILAD BARACH

In a lengthy article highlighting distinctions between the religious worlds of biblical Judaism and modern observance, R. Yuval Cherlow expresses regret about how certain historical institutions have frozen prayer's form, consequently dulling its vibrancy in the eyes of many Jews. The instances of prayers in Tanakh reflect an era in which individuals would spontaneously cry out to God with thanks for His salvation or with supplication from a state of despair, without a prescribed structure or text. Upon the Temple's destruction, the newly-instituted association of prayer with the sacrificial service<sup>1</sup> introduced rigid requirements of who must pray and when, the format of prayer, and the constant and consistent language of prayer, all of which mirror standards in the sacrificial order. As the halakhic minutiae related to prayer advanced and crystallized (a process that R. Cherlow does not protest), prayer, in the eyes of many, became merely another formal obligation cast upon the individual, seemingly detached in its current form from the common experiences and passions of the everyman.<sup>2</sup>

What was prayer supposed to be? What has it become? When attempting to establish the appropriate nature and role of *tefillah*, it is instructive to look at prominent approaches amongst earlier Jewish thinkers. A well-known reference in Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* famously claims that daily prayer is a biblical commandment.<sup>3</sup> Ramban rejects this opinion, insisting instead that "the entire matter of *tefillah* is not a [biblical] obligation at all," and our daily prayers fulfill only a rabbinic obligation.<sup>4</sup>

Beneath this surface disagreement about the halakhic origins of prayer lies crucial information about its purpose and meaning, which can be extracted by analyzing each side's arguments and formulations.

Ramban writes that prayer is not an obligation, but a result of "the Creator's attribute of kindness towards us, that He listens and responds whenever we call to Him." When faced with a comment of the

Sifrei, which appears to derive *tefillah* from the verse, "To serve God,"<sup>5</sup> Ramban dismisses it as an *asmakhta* (non-literal textual reference), or, alternatively, explains:

[The goal of the *Sifrei* is] to tell that part of the *avodah* (service)... is that we should pray to Him in times of distress, and our eyes and hearts should be toward Him solely, like the eyes of slaves are toward the hand of their masters. This is the matter of the verse, "When you go to war in your land, against the enemy who oppresses you, you shall blast trumpets, and you will be remembered before Hashem, your God."<sup>6</sup> This is a commandment, in each and every distress that comes upon the public, to cry out before Him with prayer and [trumpet] blasts.<sup>7</sup>

*The focus of Rambam's prayer is ambiguous, and he does not state that God listens or responds to our prayers. Readers are left to wonder whether prayer is just a formal obligation, a debt to fulfill, without any apparent meaning or objective.*

Ramban views prayer as a means of expressing one's dependence on God and beseeching His assistance in times of need. It lacks a formal structure – it can be accomplished with but a trumpet blast – yet prayer signifies the open channel between any Jew in distress and his Creator.

In contrast, Rambam's words reveal little about the nature of prayer:

The fifth commandment is that He commanded us to serve Him... Even though this commandment is also one of the general commandments as we explained in the fourth principle,<sup>8</sup> it is specifically [applied to mean] that He commanded us in prayer.

In the words of the Sifrei: "'To serve God' – this is *tefillah*."<sup>9</sup>

In his summary of this commandment, Ramban employs the word "serve" ten times, but fails to define service or explain how it is accomplished through prayer. He does not elaborate upon the content of prayer, or the mindset of a person in prayer. In this brief introduction to the biblical obligation of *tefillah*, Ramban offers virtually no instructive or characteristic information.

Even *Mishneh Torah*, in which Ramban designates a full section of halakhot for the discussion of prayer, is surprisingly spare in identifying prayer's fundamen-

tal nature. Rambam begins these halakhot by quoting the *mitsvat aseh*, "You shall serve Hashem, your God."<sup>10</sup> In a parallel verse, "You shall serve Him with all your hearts,"<sup>11</sup> Hazal interpreted "service of the heart" as prayer. Instead of elaborating on the philosophical implications of identifying prayer as "service of the heart," Rambam launches into the specific details of the law: while the number of daily prayers, their texts, and their times are not biblically ordained, the core structure of prayer – the sequence in the *Amidah* of praise of God, then asking for one's needs, and finally thanking God for His kindness – is biblically mandated.<sup>12</sup> This is the first glimpse Rambam provides of the nature of prayer, though it is far from clear. Which of these three motifs is the pulse of prayer? Do they all share exactly the same significance and centrality? Can it be that the baseline obligation to pray imposes such a rigid and complex structure?

Comparison with Ramban's earlier comments underscores the impenetrability of Rambam's approach. Ramban clearly states that prayer's most fundamental objective is to provide a way for man to contact God and request help with his struggles. The focus of *tefillah*, then, is petition in times of distress, to which God, in His kindness, listens and responds. The focus of Rambam's prayer is ambiguous, and he does not state that God listens or responds to our prayers. Readers are left to wonder whether prayer is just a formal obligation, a debt to fulfill, without any apparent meaning or objective.

Surprisingly, Rambam elsewhere in *Mishneh Torah* casts *tefillah* in the very terms used by Ramban: "It is a *mitsvah*... to cry out before God in any time of great distress." This wording appears not in *Hilkhot Tefillah*, but in the header to *Hilkhot Ta'anit*, laws related to public and private fast days. In the main text, Rambam defines the *mitsvah*:

It is a positive biblical commandment to cry out and blast trumpets for every distress that comes upon the public, as it is said, "[When faced with] the enemy who oppresses you, you shall blast with trumpets."<sup>13</sup> This is to say: for anything which oppresses you, like famine, pestilence, locust, and the like, cry out because of them, and blast [trumpets].<sup>14</sup>

Rambam, then, believes that a community is specially obligated to cry out to God in times of distress, in a manner very similar to how Ramban interprets prayer. There is neither a fixed text to read nor a predefined schedule for this prayer.<sup>15</sup> It applies both to the community as a whole and to lone individuals, whenever they are found in dire straits.<sup>16</sup> Rambam explains that this outcry is a form of repentance and leads to the trouble's removal, and that a congregation that prays in unity will not be unanswered.<sup>17</sup>

If Rambam's *Hilkhot Ta'anit* appear to align with Ramban's characterization of prayer, it is evident that Rambam's *Hilkhot Tefillah* must refer to something else. If need-based prayer and communication has been allocated to a separate commandment and a separate set of laws, how can the commandment labeled *tefillah* be characterized? To address this problem, a deeper understanding of both *Hilkhot Ta'anit* and *Hilkhot Tefillah* must be developed.

Several commentaries on Rambam's works note a striking inconsistency between *Hilkhot Ta'anit* and Rambam's own *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*. The emotive, desperate form of prayer identified in *Hilkhot Ta'anit* is enumerated in a peculiar context in Rambam's list of the 613 biblical commandments.

The fifty-ninth *mitsvah* is that He commanded us to blow trumpets in the Tem-





ple upon the offering of each sacrifice from the festival sacrifices, as He – may He be exalted – says, “And on the days of your happiness, and on your festivals, and on your new months, you shall blow the trumpets.”<sup>18</sup> ... And we are also commanded to blow trumpets in times of need and distress, when we call out before Hashem – may He be exalted, as He says, “When you go to war in your land, against the enemy who oppresses you, [you shall blast trumpets].”<sup>19,20</sup>

This passage poses several difficulties. Why does Rambam combine two separate uses of the trumpets – from two separate verses – into a single biblical commandment?<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, why does Rambam inconsistently portray this commandment? In *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, it is defined as the purely physical act of blowing a trumpet; in the body of *Hilkhot Ta’anit*, the act of blowing is complemented with prayer; the header of *Hilkhot Ta’anit* refers exclusively to the prayer in times of need. What is Rambam’s real position, and why is his presentation so inconsistent?

The common thematic ground between trumpet blasts during festival sacrifices and those during situations of distress is an atmosphere of heightened emotions. The first half of *mitsvah* fifty-nine refers to a time of elation, when we rejoice on the days of our happiness and the festivals. The second half represents the opposite extreme: fear and apprehension as the enemy nears. The trumpets serve as a neutral canvas onto which either extreme of human emotion can be vividly projected. They stand for the inexpressible height of national celebration and the inexpressible depth of a community in despair.<sup>22</sup> This may explain Rambam’s unified presen-

tation of the trumpets’ two purposes: the trumpets are to signify elevated levels of focus and concentration (*kavvanah*) during festive offerings and communal crisis.<sup>23</sup>

Rambam attaches the emotion-laden trumpet blasts to his presentation of prayer in *Hilkhot Ta’anit*, but they are absent from *Hilkhot Tefillah*. As the texture of the prayer outlined in *Hilkhot Ta’anit* becomes revealed, the core of prayer as delineated in *Hilkhot Tefillah* still appears to lack the elements of emotion, thanksgiving, or desperation; it remains an enigma.

Perhaps a fuller understanding of Rambam’s conception of *Hilkhot Tefillah*-prayer can be gained through attention to a recurring theme in *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* and in the first chapter of

*Hilkhot Tefillah*.

Rambam’s ten-fold mention of “*avodah*” in *mitsvah* 5, a word which commonly refers to *korbanot*, is complemented in *Mishneh Torah* by a series of laws derived from the sacrificial origin of Jewish prayer. The number of daily prayers reflects the number of required offerings in the *Mikdash* each day.<sup>24</sup> The nighttime prayer corresponds to the burning of limbs on the *mizbe’ah* at night.<sup>25</sup>

An individual can elect to pray an extra prayer just as he can volunteer to bring an extra offering, a *korban todah*.<sup>26</sup> A congregation, though, cannot add a prayer, since a community as a whole cannot bring such an offering.<sup>27</sup>

Rambam’s strong association of prayer to the *avodah* redirects the question of prayer’s nature to that of the *korbanot*. At the end of *Sefer Avodah*, in which many of the laws pertaining to the Temple offerings are developed, Rambam stresses that a Jew must express humility and submission when faced with a *hok*, a religious law which has no apparent logical rationale. Rambam discusses the challenge of a *hok* at the close of this particular book of *Mishneh Torah* because “all the sacrifices are in the category of *hukkim*.”<sup>28</sup>

If *tefillah* is so tightly connected to the *avodah*, which

*Rambam, then, agrees with Ramban’s presentation of the commandment of prayer. The prayer of Hilkhot Ta’anit is an obligation specific to a time of distress which lacks inherent structure and is aimed to prompt a divine salvation. Rambam’s real innovation is in counting a second mitsvah of prayer, of a rigid and axiomatic nature, to be fulfilled on a regular basis.*

Rambam labels a *hok*, perhaps we are pursuing an underlying motivation for prayer where no consistent direction is to be found. Neither sacrifices nor prayer are intrinsically logical or understandable, and every Jew is free to come up with his or her own associations for prayer.<sup>29</sup> Though the patriarchs established prayer to fulfill a purpose (and not, apparently, as a fulfillment of a not-yet-commanded irrational *hok*), the prayers as they are ultimately codified in Halakhah stand independently of their founders’ original motives. This is why Rambam leaves out the fundamental identity of prayer in *Hilkhot Tefillah*: like *korbanot*, the *mitsvah* of prayer lacks intrinsic logic.

The trumpets of *mitsvah* fifty-nine infuse these two *hukkim* with a human side. Though both sacrifices and prayer are rigidly standardized in time, person, and procedure, trumpet blasts allow for individual expression. They are simultaneously suited to both the passionate ecstasy of the festival service and also to the torturous distress of a national predicament.

Rambam, then, agrees with Ramban’s presentation of the commandment of prayer. The prayer of *Hilkhot Ta’anit* is an obligation specific to a time of distress, which lacks inherent structure and is aimed to prompt a divine salvation. Rambam’s real innovation is in counting a second *mitsvah* of prayer, of a rigid and axiomatic nature, to be fulfilled on a regular basis. A person who recites the given formula every day of his or her life accomplishes one level of prayer. In a time of despair, or whenever he feels compelled to cry out on his own terms, he fulfills the other.

R. Cherlow, in criticizing the modern perception of prayer, laments formal *tefillah*’s displacement of the passionate outcries of old. However, as we have seen, to this day, Jewish prayer encompasses much more than the established texts and contexts. Opportunities and encouragement for individual initiatives underlie the *mitsvah* of prayer, according to both Rambam and Ramban. The rigidity of post-rabbinic prayer supplements, rather than replaces, the original spontaneous prayer. Though it is unfortunate that many people associate prayer with only its established form, who can say that the reflexive outcry model is practiced any less frequently or by any fewer people now than in biblical times? Though standardized prayer takes place thrice daily, spontaneous prayer does not. It is not meant to be a daily ritual; it is not

sustainable as a daily ritual. It remains a largely voluntary and impulsive act, and the hope to make it widespread and commonplace serves only to dilute it.

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1 See *Berakhot* 26b.

2 R. Yuval Cherlow, “*ha-Im ha-Tanakh Hayah?*” *Megaddim* 33 (2000-2001): 75-121.

3 Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, *Mitsvot Aseh*, 5.

4 Ramban to *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, ad loc. This and all translations are mine.

5 *Devarim* 11:13.

6 *Bamidbar* 10:9.

7 Ramban, ad loc.

8 Rambam here refers to the fourth *shoresh* from his introduction to *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*. There he writes that *mitsvot* which merely reinforce all other commandments should not be counted among the 613 biblical *mitsvot*. Thus, for example, the directive, “Be holy” (*Vayikra* 19:2), is excluded from *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*. An exception to this rule, which Rambam invokes in the context of prayer, is if the general exhortation applies especially to a particular commandment.

9 Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, *Mitsvot Aseh*, 5.

10 *Shemot* 23:25.

11 *Devarim* 11:13.

12 Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:1-2.

13 *Bamidbar* 10:9.

14 Rambam, *Hilkhot Ta’anit* 1:1.

15 Although the *Mishnah* (*Masekhet Ta’anit*) and Rambam (*Hilkhot Ta’anit*) establish laws governing when fast days are declared during droughts and the appropriate format of prayer on these days, these are not inherent to the biblical commandment, as is the case for the structure of prayer (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:2).

16 *Ibid.*, 1:9.

17 Rambam, *Hilkhot Ta’anit* 1:2; *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:6.

18 *Bamidbar* 10:10.

19 *Ibid.*, 10:9.

20 Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, *Mitsvot Aseh*, 59.

21 This question is raised by *Maggid Mishneh* to *Hilkhot Ta’anit* 1:1. He is left without a sufficient answer.

22 These ideas are based on a lecture by the Rav: R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “*Bein Za’akah Ve-Hatsotserot*,” in R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Divrei Hashkafah* (Jerusalem: Aliner Books, 1994), 49-58.

23 See *Peri Megaddim*, *Mishbetsot Zahav*, to *Orah Hayyim* 575:2.

24 Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:5.

25 *Ibid.*, 1:6.

26 *Ibid.*, 1:9.

27 *Ibid.*, 1:10.

28 Rambam, *Hilkhot Me’ilah* 8:8.

29 Rambam recommends that every Jew try to find meaning in every *mitsvah*, but respond with respectful resignation when he or she cannot comprehend a *hok*.





# Synagogues: Ensuring a Nation's Continuation

BY: PENINA WEIN

Marc Lee Raphael, in his book, *The Synagogue in America: A Short History*, makes the claim that, "the most significant institution in life of Jews" has been, and is, the synagogue.<sup>1</sup> In the English language, a synagogue is defined as, "The building where a Jewish assembly or congregation meets for religious worship and instruction."<sup>2</sup> However, when examining this institution, one must ask if the purpose of the synagogue was always to create a meeting place for organized religion, or if there were other motivations behind its institution as well.

The first mention in the Bible of a communal gathering place for religious worship is the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle).<sup>3</sup> It is in the commandment for building the *Mishkan* that God declares "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them."<sup>4</sup> This commandment seems to imply that God's original intentions for the creation of His earthly home were in order for there to be a place for Him amongst the people of Israel. Based on this explanation, universal Godly worship seems to have been a secondary purpose of the *Mishkan*.

The commandment to build the Temple in Jerusalem later on in history continued this theme. When David returns from his final battles and settles in Jerusalem, he tells Nathan the prophet that he wants to build God a permanent Temple, as he believes that it is unjust for himself, the king, to have a permanent dwelling, but for the King of Kings to not have one.<sup>5</sup> Nathan allows David to begin planning the Temple, until God appears to Nathan in a dream and exclaims that David's son Solomon will build His Temple instead. During this dream, God uses the word "*le-shivti*," "for Me to dwell in," to explain why the Temple should be built.<sup>6</sup> This root word, "dwell," is of similar meaning to the word "*ve-shakhanti*," used in the commandment to build the *Mishkan*,<sup>7</sup> and conveys the idea that the main purpose for building the Temple was so that it would be a physical dwelling for God, just as the *Mishkan* was when Israel was in the desert.

While the Temple was built as a space for God, it became a significant gathering place as well. According to R. Menachem Hacohen, the Temple was epicenter of communal religious worship.<sup>8</sup> Since the Temple was supposed to be the closest source for connection to God, people were drawn there to pray to Him, as well as to perform His commandments. In particular, the *mitsvah* of *aliyyah le-regel* (ascending [to the Temple Mount] for festivals) provided Jews with the opportunity to travel to the Temple three times a year, and as a result meet fellow constituents. This created a

community of worshippers, who would travel to God's Temple three times over the course of the year and join together to serve Him. The significance of this ritual is that it gave the Temple another purpose as well; it was not only a place to connect to God, but also a place to connect to other people.

During the Second Temple period, another institution, the synagogue, developed. It allowed Jews to connect to each other in somewhat of a more intimate setting than the Temple. While people continued to use the Temple regularly, the synagogue became "a well-developed institution" as well.<sup>9</sup> The origin of this trend, of synagogues coming into existence and then being used more frequently, is unclear, but according to scholars, it is clear that Synagogues existed "at least a century before the Romans destroyed the Temple."<sup>10</sup> Proof of their existence is found in archeology, as well as in rabbinic literature<sup>11</sup> and the works of Philo of Alexandria and Josephus.<sup>12</sup>

The synagogues that existed during the Second Temple period were different from those that exist today, as they were not places of prayer. According to Steven Fine, the ancient synagogues were mainly places where people gathered to learn scripture. It was because of this distinction that both the synagogue and the Second Temple could coexist without competition. Fine quotes an early rabbinic text which discusses Jews celebrating the holiday of *Sukkot*, who would travel from the Temple to the synagogue after offering the morning sacrifice, and then return to the Temple to offer the *mussaf* sacrifice. He claims that this indicates that Jews during the Second Temple period utilized the two institutions for different purposes. "The Temple was regarded as the center of the universe ... [the connection] between the sacred and profane, [whereas] synagogues were local places where Jews came together to study ... the revealed word of God. While the Temple stood, the synagogue was a complementary, not a competitive, institution."<sup>13</sup>

After the destruction of the Second Temple, synagogues began to take on special importance. While the synagogue was never considered to be a Temple replacement, it was termed a *mikdash me'at*, a miniature temple, a name borrowed taken from Ezekiel 11:16. In this *pasuk*, God tells the People of Israel that although He has scattered them amongst the nations after the destruction of the first Temple, he has "been to them a little sanctuary in the countries where they are."<sup>14</sup> The Rabbis explain that

"little sanctuaries" refers to the synagogues and learning centers that existed in the diaspora.<sup>15</sup> This terminology emphasizes the significant stature that synagogues gained during exile. They not only retained their study hall status, but also became places where people connected to God through prayer as well.

This trend is proven by rabbinic statements and decrees in the post-Temple period. R. Yohanan explains that Bil'am intended to curse Israel that it should not possess synagogues or study halls.<sup>16</sup> Instead, however, God turned this curse into a blessing, and decreed that they will forever exist as institutions within Israel. According to R. Aba bar Kahana, this blessing is the only blessing that did not revert to a curse for Israel later, and remained a blessing for them.<sup>17</sup> This statement seemingly shows that although the literal interpretation of the *pesukim* does not refer to synagogues outright, the sages felt that it was important to make a statement that synagogues will remain forever. R. Yehuda explains that since the synagogues were once holy, "one is not allowed to use their remains (if they are destroyed) as shortcuts to walk through,"<sup>18</sup> indicating that synagogues have a level of innate holiness.<sup>19</sup> R. Abahu adds deeper significance to synagogue rituals by drawing a parallel between synagogue and Temple service, when he exclaims, "He that prays in a synagogue, it is as if he offered a pure offering."<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, the Rabbis stressed the importance of the synagogue when they decreed, in a *beraita*, that one of the ten things a righteous person should make sure exists in his community is a synagogue.<sup>21</sup> While there may be multiple explanations as to why the Rabbis felt that having a synagogue in a community was so crucial, perhaps their reasoning is reflected in the noble title of "*mikdash me'at*." After the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis felt that the Jews needed an institution to help maintain an aspect of what had existed in the Temple. The goal was not to replace what the Temple had been, but rather to use the synagogue, which was already established as an institution, as something that could help ensure the future of the Jewish people. By introducing prayer to the already established Torah study emphasis, the synagogue became a place where people could connect to God in any form they liked. However, because it was also a communal place, Hazal ensured that the practice of Judaism would maintain a communal nature. The synagogue provided a supportive religious structure for Jews who may have been feeling lost and distant

from God after the destruction of the Temple. Fine points out that the parallel that is frequently drawn between prayer and Temple offerings further enlightens this thesis. In the post-Temple period, prayer became the focal point for Israel's hope of redemption, a result of motifs in the daily prayers as well as structure. A text in the Cairo Genizah explains: "[By reciting] prayers at their proper time and directing their hearts, they [will] merit and will see the rebuilding of the Temple and [the reestablishment of] the perpetual sacrifices and offerings, as it is said: 'And I will bring them to my holy mountain and I will rejoice in my house of prayer.'"<sup>22</sup> Fine explains that "the synagogue became the bridge between the loss of their cosmic center and the hope for the rebuilding of the Temple."<sup>23</sup> By having prayers which focused on rebuilding the Temple, as well as performing practices symbolic of the *korbanot*, Jews were able to focus their attention on the hopes of redemption. By attaching a higher significance to an already established structure, the Rabbis created a place people could gather to connect to God as a community while being actively furthering the redemptive process. This creation thus helped to ensure that the Jewish people would remain together as a nation, as well as retain the desire to return to Israel and the Temple.

When examining our synagogues today, one can see that they have truly developed into the center of our religious worship. Typically, synagogues are not only places where people just to pray, but rather have become much more. On any given week, a synagogue might have numerous *shi'urim*, youth activities, and cultural events. Attending *Shabbat* morning services has become a weekly occurrence for most Orthodox families serving as a time to pray communally, see family and friends, and listen to words of Torah. The goal that the Rabbis had to ensure the continuation of the Jewish spirit through the synagogue structure has been fulfilled.

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1 Marc Lee Raphael, *The Synagogue in America, A Short History* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 207

2 "Synagogue" in *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2011.

3 See Exodus 29:43.

4 Exodus 25:8. A Bible translations are from the JPS 1971 edition.



5 II Samuel 7:2.  
 6 II Samuel 7:5.  
 7 Exodus 25:8.  
 8 R. Menachem Hacoen, "Mikdash Me'at: Beit ha-Kenesset ve-Keilav," *Da'at* database, available at: <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/art/yahadut/mikdash.htm>  
 9 Steven Fine, "Did the Synagogue Replace the Temple?," *Bible Review* 12,2 (1996),18.

10 Ibid.  
 11 See *Ketubot* 105a, which discusses the hundreds of synagogues that existed in Israel during the Second Temple period.  
 12 Fine, Ibid.  
 13 Ibid.  
 14 Ezekiel 11:16.  
 15 *Megillah* 29a.  
 16 See Numbers 23:5  
 17 Sanhedrin 105b.

18 *Megillah* 3:3.  
 19 Fine, 20.  
 20 *Yerushalmi Brakhot* 5:1. Translation from Fine.  
 21 *Sanhedrin* 17a.  
 22 Louis Ginzberg, *Genizah Studies in Memory of Doctor Solomon Schechter*, vol. 1 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1928; ), 152-153 "(Hebrew)."

23 Fine, 26.

## Agnon's "Whirlwind of Voices": Secular Zionism, Hanukkah, and Contemporary Jewish Identity

BY: RONI ZEMELMAN

What is the difference between a Gentile atheist and a Jewish atheist?

The Gentile atheist does not believe in God; the Jewish atheist believes there is no God.<sup>1</sup>

In *Temol Shilshom*, Shmuel Yosef Agnon's panoramic novel that depicts the Jewish settlements in Israel during the Second Aliyah (1904-1912), a memorable scene occurs in a Jaffa inn where historical characters are eating dinner. Gathered around the table are Yosef Hayyim Brenner, a prominent secular Zionist author of the Second Aliyah; Jacob Malkhov, the owner of the Jaffa inn whose character is based on a historical Chabad Hasid;<sup>2</sup> Hemdat, a fictional character based on Agnon himself,<sup>3</sup> and Yitshak Kumer, the novel's torn protagonist. Bemoaning the religious infidelity of the secular Zionists, Malkhov recounts the events of the previous night, in which Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and other prominent Zionists participated in a Hanukkah ball in the Bezalel art school. Quoting the words of Ben-Yehuda as written in a newspaper, Malkhov describes the raucous party to his guests:

When Professor Boris Schatz made his Bezalel art school, Hanukkah came upon him, that holy holiday they started calling the holiday of the Maccabees. They went and made him a joyous party. They put up a statue of the high Priest Mattithiah, holding a sword in his hand to pierce the tyrant who was sacrificing a pig on the altar they had made in honor of Antiochus the Wicked. They spent all night in riot and gluttony. The next day, Ben-Yehuda wrote affectionately about the party in his newspaper, just that he wasn't comfortable with that statue they had put up in the hall, for this Mattithiah was a zealot for his religion, for his religion and not for his land, for as long as the Greeks were spreading over our land and robbing and oppressing and murdering and killing and destroying cities and villages, Mattithiah and

his sons sat in Modi'in, their city, and didn't lift a finger, but when the Greeks started offending the religion, as the prayer says, to force Thy people Israel to forget Thy Torah and transgress the commands of Thy will,<sup>4</sup> he leaped like a lion, he and his sons the heroes, and so on and so forth, and they decided to honor the event with an eight day holiday. And now, says Ben-Yehuda in his article, and now I wonder, when they gathered last night to honor him, if they had breathed life into the statue, or if he himself were alive, if he wouldn't have stabbed every single one of us with the sword in his hand, and sacrificed all of us on the altar.<sup>5</sup>

Ben-Yehuda's comments highlight the contradictory role Mattityahu ("Mattithiah" in the English translation) played in secular Zionist ideology. Standing in the form of a statue in Jerusalem's Bezalel art school, Mattityahu is described as a "zealot for his religion," who sat idly by as Hellenists destroyed cities and villages, but "leaped like a lion" when they offended the religion. His religious zealotry, as Ben-Yehuda notes, would not bode well for these secular celebrators. Yet, it was those same celebrators, specifically the artist Boris Schatz, who erected the statue of him. A paradoxical image therefore emerges in which Mattityahu would stab the free-spirited supporters who invoked his heroic legacy as a vindication of

their philosophy. This ironic scene captures the revolutionary manner in which secular Zionists looked to biblical and post-biblical liturgy to validate their nationalist narrative.

In broad terms, the celebrations at the Hanukkah ball represent the secular Zionist culture that pervaded the New Yishuv at the time. Secular Zionism—the national, cultural, and ethnic awareness that developed in the pre-state era—was a movement that saw itself as the Jewish nation's "authentic representative," in the words of Dr. Yitzhak Conforti, engaging in a "constant dialogue with the Jewish past."<sup>6</sup> But the Zionist thinkers' relationship to that Jewish past was complex, as they would set new ideals in opposition to it and emphasize both connection and rebellion, themes that proliferate throughout their literature.<sup>7</sup> Through their efforts to restore the "lost Jewish masculinity"<sup>8</sup> and move away from the feeble model of Eastern European piety, Zionist leaders and thinkers turned to the traditional liturgy for heroic symbols of secular strength and bravery.

Thus, the Bible was now emphasized for anthropological purposes and viewed as a source of Jewish cultural heroes who would resonate with a generation of nationalistic settlers.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it was Ben-Gurion himself who instituted the *Hidon ha-Tanakh* (Bible Quiz) competition, hoping to foster a love of this nationalistic book in an effort to inform and shape

the identity of the newly assertive Jew in Israel.<sup>10</sup> Passover took on new significance, as *kibbutsim* of the pre-state era used a Zionist version of the *Haggadah* in their *seder* commemorations. These *Haggadot* included Hayyim Nahman Bialik's poem "*Metei Midbar ha-Aharonim*" ("The Last Dead of the Desert")—a text that draws an analogy between the modern Zionist settlers and the biblical Jews who conquered Israel—into the ceremony.<sup>11</sup> And it was in the context of this revolutionary historiography that the Hanukkah heroes assumed an especially important place in the twentieth-century Zionist psyche.

Underlying Agnon's scene is the fact that the secular Zionists at the Bezalel party embraced Hanukkah as a time of national awakening, not religious salvation. The revisionist Zionists amongst the crowd saw it as a festival that commemorates "heroism in battle and self-sacrifice for the nation," while the socialist Zionists viewed it in Marxist terms, as a celebration of the lower class peasants revolting against their persecutors.<sup>12</sup> Both groups, however, celebrated a holiday that was emptied of its religious messages in two main ways. First, the miracle of the oil was ignored, even radically refuted. A popular poem by Aharon Ze'ev, "*Anu Nose'im Lappidim*" ("We Are Bearing the Torches"), which made its way into various Zionist pamphlets in the pre-state era, proudly proclaims, "No miracle occurred for us; we found no jar of oil."<sup>13</sup> Speaking for secular Zionism, these triumphant poets establish their continuity from Jewish history (declaring themselves to be authentic "Bearers of the Torches"), but revolt against it as well, passionately rejecting the notion of God's salvation through miracles ("No miracle occurred to us"), a repugnant idea to the masculine "New Jew." Second, and related, they ignored the religious zealotry of the Maccabees and cast them in this nationalistic mold of the New Jew. Hanukkah became "the holiday of the Maccabees," a patriotic celebration of Mattityahu and company's self-sacri-





fice, strength, and heroism in battle, not of their zealotry for the religion.<sup>14</sup> Thus, from the annual Tel Aviv torch processions that commemorated the Maccabees' struggle in the 1920s, to the various secular school trips to the Maccabean caves in Modi'in,<sup>15</sup> the miracle of the oil was nowhere to be found in the narrative of the Hanukkah story. The Maccabees were championed solely for their nationalistic courage.

It is from this world of Zionist revolutionary historiography that the statue of Mattityahu – which overlooked an art school known for combining “biblical themes, Islamic design, and European traditions”<sup>16</sup> in its work – appears to readers through the words of Ben-Yehuda as quoted by Malkhov at his Jaffa dinner table. Through this “whirlwind of voices,”<sup>17</sup> Agnon creates a tense dialogue between competing perspectives on the Zionist ambitions. Malkhov – the defender of religion throughout the novel – conveys Ben-Yehuda's quotation to his guests to bemoan the hypocrisy of the religiously-shallow Zionist celebrations. Ben-Yehuda's own voice, by contrast, conveys the internal tension and ambivalence he felt as result of the paradoxical situation, the religious zealot overlooking the secular, often anti-religious celebrators. But another guest at

the table, Yosef Hayyim Brenner, behaves more enigmatically. After Malkhov finishes the story, Brenner erupts in laughter, not voicing an opinion but apologizing for his discourtesy. Brenner, the existentialist writer of the Second Aliyah, may react so light-heartedly in this scene because he views the entire conversation as trivial. Religion, and adherence to religious memory, did not factor into Brenner's value system, so the biting irony of Ben-Yehuda's remarks are taken for what they are—a humorous vignette, a good one-liner. But for those Zionists who viewed their lives and identities as authentic continuations of the Jewish past – namely, the other characters at the dinner table – the ironic excerpt poses difficult questions of Jewish identity and leaves no simple answer.

It is therefore left to readers, who are invited to join Malkhov at the dinner table of early twentieth-century Jaffa, to weigh in on the debate, one which resonates as much in 2012 as it did in 1908. As Hillel Halkin describes in the joke that heads this discussion, Jews, whether they are atheists or not, are conditioned to live in a “purposeful world;” they must believe that there is or is no God.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, the secular Zionists turned to religious symbols of the Jewish past, the traditional expressions of belief, and imbued them with alternate,

revolutionary meaning by casting them in a new value system. As a consequence, contradictions emerged in their embrace of these symbols, particularly the Maccabees and the Hanukkah festival. The questions for readers thus become acute: Does our celebration of Hanukkah remain faithful to the Jewish past, or does it, like that of secular Zionists, radically depart from it? Does it matter? Arising from a page of Agnon, contemporary Jews—whether they identify with Malkhov's criticism, Ben-Yehuda's ambivalence, or even Brenner's laughter—must face these unavoidable questions regarding Hanukkah and the Jewish past.

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1 My paraphrase of a joke found in Hillel Halkin, “The Disappointments,” *New Republic* 223, 6 (2000): 39-44. Special thanks to Rabbi Carmy for stylistic guidance in the writing process. All errors are my own.

2 See Michal Gorvin, “Agnon's Ironic Spinning Top,” *Sh'ma* 40/664 (2009): 11-12.

3 Ibid, 11.

4 See the *Al ha-Nissim* (“For the Miracles”) prayer.

5 S.Y. Agnon. *Only Yesterday*, transl. by Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) 406.

6 Yitzhak Conforti, “Zionist Awareness of the Jewish Past: Inventing Tradition or Renewing the Ethnic Past?,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12,1 (2012): 155-171.

7 Ella Belfer, *A Split Identity: The Conflict Between the Sacred and the Secular in the Jewish World* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2004), 11-32.

8 Conforti, 159.

9 David Hartman, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition: An Ancient People Debating its Future* (Chelsea, MI: Yale University Press, 2000), 74.

10 Ibid.

11 Conforti, 163.

12 Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “Hanukkah and the Myth of the Maccabees in Ideology and in Society” in Shlomo A. Deshen, Charles S. Liebman, and Moshe Shokeid, *Israeli Judaism: The Sociology of Religion in Israel*, volume 7 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995): 303-323.

13 See Hebrew Wikipedia page on “*Anu Nose'im Lappidim*” for the text of the poem, available at: [he.wikipedia.org](http://he.wikipedia.org).

14 Deshen, 303.

15 Ibid, 309.

16 Edward Rothstein, “Jewish Art, the Hudson and Bingo in the Bronx,” *The New York Times*, 10 June, 2009, available at: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

17 Gorvin, 12.

18 Halkin, 43.

# Creative Arts

Images and information provided by the Yeshiva University Museum



## “This is My Lord and I Will Beautify Him”: From the Beth Alpha Synagogue to Synagogue in Safed

BY: ATARA SIEGEL

The synagogue, whose title stems from the Greek word “synagein,” “to come together,”<sup>2</sup> has for centuries been at the center of Jewish prayer, communal life, and Torah study. The structures, levels of formality, and exact uses of synagogues have varied greatly across time, place, and community preference. Even the word used for “synagogue” varies extensively, as different worshippers might pray in a Temple, *shul* or *beit kenesset*. These two images from the YU Museum spotlight two different types of synagogues from two different time periods. One image depicts a model of the Beth Alpha Synagogue, representing the way this synagogue may have looked when it

was originally built in the sixth century CE. The second image is a 1957 watercolor by Israeli artist Nahum Gutman depicting, as implied by the title, an unidentified synagogue in Safed.

At first glance, these two different images do not even seem comparable. The Beth Alpha image is a recreation, an imagination of how the ancient Beth Alpha synagogue might have appeared when it was first built in the period of the closing of the Babylonian Talmud. The remains of the Beth Alpha synagogue were found in 1928 in the Jezreel valley in the Galilee, near the modern city of Beit She'an. The discovery of the near-complete mosaic floor of the

synagogue was an archeological wonder. An inscription at the front door of Beth Alpha gives a partial clue as to the date of the synagogue; the Aramaic inscription reports that the mosaic floor was laid “during the ... year of the reign of the emperor Justinus,” assumed to be the Byzantine emperor Flavius Justinus Augustus who reigned during the years 518-527 CE.<sup>3</sup> The synagogue is most famous for its elaborate mosaic which measures 28 meters (about 92 feet) long by 14 meters (about 46 feet) wide.<sup>4</sup> The mosaic uses rich colors, including reds, pinks, yellows, browns and even emerald,<sup>5</sup> and is considered “one of the most striking examples of ancient Jewish art ever uncov-

ered.”<sup>6</sup> Featuring geometric patterns on the sides,<sup>7</sup> the most interesting sections of the mosaic are its elaborately designed panels. A central wheel, somewhat incongruous for a *shul*, depicts the seasons of the year, signs of the zodiac, and what some presume to be the sun-god Helios.<sup>8</sup> Flanking the wheel are two panels, one illustrating the famous scene of *Akeidat Yitshak*, and one depicting two *menorot* flanking an *aron kodesh* along with other Jewish symbols. The model of Beth Alpha recreates for us a unique, grand, and ancient synagogue.

On the other hand, Gutman's watercolor of a *Synagogue in Safed* depicts a rather simple, nondescript synagogue. The one-





Left:  
Haggadah and Order of  
Services for Various Holidays  
Artist: Yechiel son of Moses  
Germany, 1745  
Pen, ink, and watercolor on  
parchment  
The Max Stern Collection  
Collection of Yeshiva  
University Museum



Left:  
Torah Crown  
Austro-Hungary, ca.  
1886-1922  
Silver: repoussé, chased  
and parcel gilt  
Collection of Yeshiva  
University Museum  
Gift of the Jewish  
Cultural Reconstruction

(From the Cover)  
Synagogue in Safed  
Artist: Nahum Gutmann (1898-1980)  
Israel, 1957  
Watercolor on paper  
The Kathryn Yochelson Collection  
Yeshiva University Museum

Right:  
Book of Psalms  
Artist: Meir Hacoheh Belinfante  
Barbados, 1742  
Pen and ink on vellum  
The Max Stern Collection  
Collection of Yeshiva University  
Museum  
This remarkable miniature  
book may be the earliest extant  
Hebrew manuscript from the  
New World. Meir Hacoheh  
Belinfante was cantor of the  
Jewish Community of Barbados.



room *shul* is mostly bare, the exterior unremarkable. The synagogue has no elaborate decorations, no specific details which distinguish it from any other synagogue. Gutman, a distinguished Israeli artist with a museum in Tel Aviv dedicated to his work,<sup>9</sup> created an image of a simple synagogue that stands in sharp contrast to the grandeur of Beth Alpha.

While both synagogues share the same general location – Israel's Galilee – the images of the synagogues seem to differ in every other respect. The Beth Alpha synagogue predates Gutman's watercolor by approximately 1500 years. The miniature

model of Beth Alpha represents an actual, identifiable synagogue, while the subject of *Synagogue in Safed* is purposely anonymous and vague. The builders of Beth Alpha spent a great deal of effort decorating their synagogue and creating a grand mosaic; *Synagogue in Safed* is purposely nondescript. However, a close look reveals similarities in the objects inside the two. Both synagogues place a strong emphasis on the *aron kodesh*. In the Beth Alpha synagogue, the final panel of the mosaic shows the *aron* in the center, flanked by *menorot* and other religious symbols. In the reconstructed model, this panel of the mosaic is

thought to lead to the space where the actual *aron kodesh* was kept. The *aron kodesh* of *Synagogue in Safed* dominates the room and immediately draws the viewer's attention. The strong purple color of the Torah inside the *aron*, the receding lines of the ceiling, the *aron's* relative height all direct the viewer's eye toward the *aron* and establish it as the focus of the piece. Although separated by centuries, the *aron* and the Torah inside it remain central to both synagogues.

In addition to focusing on similar elements within the synagogue, both images also share a desire for the aesthetic. The model of Beth Alpha shows the syn-

agogue's grandeur: its impressive scale, stately pillars, and elaborate mosaic. Gutman's painting, on the other hand, depicts a synagogue which is bare and contains just the necessities: a table, a few chairs and *shtenders* at the side, an *aron*, and a *bimah* against the wall. Yet the *shul* is not depicted as neglected or unwelcoming; it is, rather, filled with light, and set outside against a cheery sky and attractive landscape. The vivid colors of the watercolor give the *shul* a bright, inviting appearance, as if to show that this nondescript *shul* is beautiful in its own right. The different types of beauty found in both the Beth Alpha and Safed



Model of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue  
Amsterdam, 1671-1675  
Architect: Elias Bouman (1636-1686)  
Collection of Yeshiva University Museum  
Endowed by Erica and Ludwig Jesselson



Below:  
The Dedication  
of the Portuguese  
Jews Synagogue at  
Amsterdam  
Artist: Bernard Picart  
(1673-1733)  
Engraver: Claude du  
Bosc (17th century)  
Amsterdam, 1721  
Etching  
The Deborah and  
Abraham Karp  
Collection  
Collection of Yeshiva  
University Museum

Model of the Beth Alpha  
Synagogue  
Early sixth century C.E.  
Collection of Yeshiva University  
Museum  
Endowed by Erica and Ludwig  
Jesselson



synagogues stand in sharp contrast to novelist Sholom Asch's view of an Eastern European synagogue as "a little edifice of new planks with a shingled roof. There lived the poor occupants' God. His dwelling was just as wretched as theirs."<sup>10</sup> The builders of the Beth Alpha synagogue and the artist in *Synagogue in Safed* instead promote the view that whether simple or grand, the place of God's worship is beautiful.

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1 Shemot 15:2, as translated in *The Koren Sacks Siddur*, p. 80.

2 Carol H. Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 1985), 5.

3 Walter Zanger, "Jewish Worship, Pagan Symbols," *Bible History Daily* (Biblical Archeology Society), 24 August, 2012, available at: [www.biblicalarchaeology.org](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org).

4 Zanger.

5 Eleazar L. Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha: An Account of the Excavations Conducted on Behalf of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem: From the Hebrew (Uni-*

*versitah Ha-Ivrit Bi-Yerushalayi*, 2003), 22  
6 Sukenik, 1.

7 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Beth Alpha-An Ancient Synagogue with a Splendid Mosaic Floor*, available at [www.mfa.gov.il](http://www.mfa.gov.il).

8 Zanger.

9 See the Nachum Gutman Art Museum website at [www.gutmanmuseum.co.il](http://www.gutmanmuseum.co.il).

10 Krinsky, 20.



# ESSAY CONTEST

TOPIC:  
“FROM FERVOR  
TO FANATICISM”

## CONTEST DETAILS

Undergraduate and graduate students of Yeshiva University are invited to submit essays or op-eds (see [www.kolhamevaser.com/writing-guide](http://www.kolhamevaser.com/writing-guide) for more details on writing standards) or full-length papers (15-20 pages) on the themes of fervor and/or fanaticism in Jewish tradition and history.

The particular angle is within the writers' discretion; papers on education, history, philosophy, Halakhah, and Tanakh are all welcome.

Administered and judged by the editorial board of *Kol Hamevaser*, under the direction of Rabbi Shmuel Hain, this year's Forum chair. Papers will be received, judged, edited, and winners selected, all on an anonymous basis.

Authors of the three best full-length papers (15-20 pages) will be invited to attend the Forum on March 3-4, as will the students who submit the top selections among the shorter essays. All quality essays and papers will be published online.

The essays can be submitted to a future issue of *Kol Hamevaser*, if the author wishes, and the first-place winner among the full-length papers will have the paper distributed to all Forum participants for discussion and considered for inclusion in the Forum volume emerging from the conference.

All submissions are due by **February 15, 2013**.

Please email submissions or direct additional questions to: [forumessaycontest@gmail.com](mailto:forumessaycontest@gmail.com). Please do not include your name anywhere on the submission file itself.

## IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE 2013 ORTHODOX FORUM

One of the chief challenges confronting all citizens and religions in the 21st century is the rise of extremism and fanaticism. As Orthodox Jews who are dedicated to promoting religious passion, the line separating fervor from fanaticism can be thin and subjective. How do we articulate a theology of fervor without fanaticism for the Modern Orthodox community?

This year's Orthodox Forum will convene and produce interdisciplinary academic and religious perspectives on fervor and fanaticism by surveying the intellectual history of zeal and zealotry in Judaism, and by examining the sociological, psychological, historical, and theological factors which contribute to a climate of increased extremism in our community and other religious communities. The Forum will also explore in-depth the contemporary perceptions and manifestations of extremism in the Orthodox communities in Israel and America, and assess potential programmatic and educational responses to these phenomena.