

Epilogue

One of the first blessings of the morning, that we discussed earlier, starts with the words **אלקי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא** (“My God, the soul that you gave me is pure”). This means that our souls have not been stained by sins. Can we really say that? Are not our souls always contaminated by iniquities?

Christians believe that souls are contaminated by sin. Every human being is born with sin, and only baptism can rid the soul of impurity. Jews do not uphold this doctrine. Anything created by the Almighty is perfect and radiates sanctity. We are all created pure and perfect, because nothing originating in God is deficient. The only stains on our souls are created by us, and only we ourselves can remove them. Therefore, we declare proudly, “The soul that you gave me is pure.”

The Greeks and the Romans, we have noted, did believe in the existence of gods, but for them the gap between the gods and humanity was so great that nothing could bridge it. They believed that the gods had no interest in the fate of humanity, so they implemented the self-sustaining powers to control it. This is called deism. The pagans believed that the planets were the seat of these powers. Each planet represented a different power; Mars, for example, governed military success. While pagan philosophers understood that statues were merely images and not gods, the masses failed to make this fine distinction. For them there was no difference between the statue and the force it represented.

Jews also understand the problem of the gap between the human and the divine. However, we solved it differently, with monotheism: **כל מקום שאתה מוצא גדולתו של הקב"ה אתה (מגילה לא.)** (“Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, there you will also find His humility”). We cannot bridge the gap between God and His

creatures, but in His miraculous way He communicates closely with the human race.

The Rabbis wanted every Jew to understand this basic philosophy of Judaism. Therefore, in our prayers we often encounter this problem and its solution.

In the first blessing of the Shma in the morning, we praise God's creative powers. Suddenly, without transition, we turn to God and beg, "Master of the universe, in Your great mercy, have pity on us." Then, as if we did not even notice this interruption, we continue our praise of God. This example shows that our ancestors were well aware of the problem we have described. That God is great is the theme of this blessing, but we understand neither how great God is nor how He will help us. In the middle of God's praises, we include a petition to demonstrate our faith that our prayers will penetrate the heavens and we will merit God's attention.

Another example of our belief that God maintains an active involvement in the affairs of the individual is found in the first paragraph of Hallel (הלל) which is taken from chapter 113 of תהלים. On one hand we say רם על כל גוים ה' על השמים כבודו ("God is above all the nations"). A little while later we proclaim ירים מעפר דל מאשפת ירים אביון ("He raises the poor from the dust heap"). On the one hand God is above the heavenly heights, and on the other hand, God lowers himself to our level.

This problem sheds light on a major difference between Judaism and Christianity. As we acknowledge the wide gap between humanity and God, we can easily understand how the idea of a semidivine mediator between God and humanity developed. Judaism rejects this notion as idolatry. This idea is expressed in the Musaf of Rosh Hashanah. The benediction of Malkiyos proclaims God to be the King of the universe. This

blessing used to include the phrase **שהם משתחוים להבל וריק** ("they bow down to vanity and nothingness and pray to a god who cannot help them"). As we noted, Christians took offense and banned this phrase.

Another basic issue in Jewish philosophy is theodicy, the justice of God. In Hebrew we call this problem **צדיק ורע לו**, רשע וטוב לו ("the righteous suffer and the evil seem to prosper"). This theme occupies much of the Bible. The dominant religion in Babylonia during the Jewish exile there had found a solution to this problem. Zoroastrianism declared the existence of two divine forces, the god of light and the god of darkness. It stated that there is an eternal struggle between these two opposing powers. If the god of light triumphs, there is peace, prosperity, and good health. If the god of darkness triumphs, misfortune fills the world.

This was a very popular religion since it offered a simple solution for these fundamental problems. At the very beginning of the first blessing of the morning Shma, we quote a verse in which the prophet Isaiah proclaims there is only one God, **יוצר** ("Who forms light and creates darkness, Who makes peace and creates everything"). Actually, this verse ends, **עושה שלום ובורא את הרע** ("Who makes peace and creates evil"). We believe there is one Power in the world. What we perceive as a divine punishment may not necessarily be so. Sometimes it is the result of not fulfilling our mandate to care for the environment. Sometimes it is the result of humanity exerting its gift of free will, albeit inappropriately. Sometimes an event that seems bad is actually good in another context. Nevertheless, we do not believe that evil comes from an independent power who struggles with God for dominance. Thus the Rabbis used the daily prayers to teach the Jews the errors of this belief.

The interference of the gentiles in our divine services changed our prayer book to a great extent. Kaddish is one of the most basic prayers, yet if not for the gentiles, we would not have this or some other beautiful and devotional expressions of our faith. During the Second Temple period, life was difficult for the Jews. On the one hand there were the holy writings with the divine promise of a glorious future the Messianic Era. On the other hand, there was the reality of defeat and death. This contradiction between bitter reality and beautiful dreams weakened the faith of many Jews. The Rabbis were called upon to strengthen this faith.

At the end of the regular davening, they called their congregants together and taught them verses from Bible, highlighting the joys of the next world. One of the worshipers would get up and intone the prayer that we today call Kaddish, asking the Almighty to turn what they had learned into reality. The common people who participated in this daily lecture did not know Hebrew any longer, so therefore Kaddish was said in Aramaic.

They actually said more than what we say in Kaddish today. In this early Kaddish, all parts of the redemption are spelled out as follows: "And revive the dead and raise them to eternal life; rebuild the city of Jerusalem and dedicate His Temple in its midst; uproot idol worship from the land and bring back the service of God to its place; and the Holy One, Blessed be He, will establish His kingdom and His glory will enlarge the Redemption and hasten the coming of the Messiah."

The Romans and early Christians did not like this version of Kaddish; they knew very well to whom we referred when we spoke about removing idol worship. The rulers of the Eastern Roman Empire therefore strictly prohibited the recitation of the various specific aspects of the Redemption. They did not object

to the mention of God's Kingdom; they also prayed for the coming of the Kingdom of God. But the mention of everything else was strictly forbidden. Our Kaddish today is a censored prayer. The Jews had no choice but to abide by the Roman command.

However the original version of Kaddish was preserved on two occasions: at a *siyum* (meal celebrating the completion of a unit of Torah study) and at a funeral. The Romans strictly prohibited learning Torah. Those who did not live up to the Roman edict were cruelly put to death. To this day we recite the martyrdom of the ten great scholars who were murdered by the Romans. A *siyum* therefore had to be celebrated in great secrecy. This gave our forefathers the opportunity to recite the entire Kaddish. At a funeral, an unabridged version of Kaddish could be recited since the Romans did not honor the Jews by attending their funerals.

Another prayer that was very unpopular with the Christians was Kedushah, the song of the angels as taught to us by the prophets. Isaiah tells us that the Seraphim praised God with the threefold recitation of the divine attribute קדוש ("holy"). This attribute is repeated three times to function as the superlative. Jonathan ben Uzziel interprets this as indicating God's superiority in three realms: in the heavens, in this world, and in the next world. But there is only one God.

The Christians, however, claimed that this threefold recitation of the adjective "holy" is a reference to their doctrine of the trinity. According to them the Jews falsified the meaning of the verse in Isaiah. Therefore, the Christians prohibited the recitation of Kedushah. What were the Jews to do? To say Kedushah might mean execution; not to say it would mean giving in to their enemies. To resolve this dilemma, they omitted Kedushah as long as they knew that the king's spies

were alert and listening carefully. The spies knew that Kedushah had to be recited standing, so once the Jews sat down, the spies relaxed.

The Jews outsmarted their enemies by sitting down and quoting the verses of Kedushah. How could they do this? They considered it a study session and added the translation and interpretation of the Targum. Thus, by adding on the element of Torah study, the Jews fulfilled their obligation to say Kedushah without violating the law requiring that we stand for it. All this is contained in the section "and a Redeemer will come to Zion." This, then, is another section that became a part of our prayers through the evil intentions of our foes.

Another example is found after the blessings recited at the beginning of the day, where we add the section **לְעוֹלָם יְהִי אָדָם יִרָא שְׂמִיָּם בְּסֻתְרָא** ("A person should always be God-fearing in private"). This part of our prayer we also owe to our enemies. An early Babylonian king was a fanatical adherent of Zoroastrianism. Under no circumstances would he permit the proclamation of the oneness of God as expressed in the Shma. Spies were posted in all synagogues, so the Rabbis advised their followers to proclaim the unity of God secretly in the privacy of their house. The evil king died at a young age and the Jews were sure that his premature death was God's punishment for interfering with the daily prayers. The Rabbis retained this daily prayer even after his death in order to remember the miracle.

During the years of persecution the Jews also included the beginning and end of the Shma in the Kedushah. The spies knew that the Shma was recited sitting, so when during the Kedushah everyone was standing, the spies paid little attention and the Jews proclaimed the Shma.

A central part of our Shabbos and Holy Day services is the Haftorah, when we chant a section from Prophets. This is yet another example of outside interference that resulted in a permanent addition to our liturgy. The reading of the Torah on Shabbos and Holy Days goes back to the early history of the Jewish people; Moses and Ezra instituted it as part of our service.

The reading of the Haftorah may simply be a continuation of the Torah reading. By reading the Torah so often in shul, the average person became acquainted with the laws of the Torah and that made him or her a better Jew. Centuries later, when the Prophets, the second part of the Bible, had been canonized, the Rabbis wanted the people to know those books and to be proficient in them as well. There was no better way to accomplish this than by making the reading of the Prophets a regular part of the synagogue service.

One theory, which has become very popular, connects the reading of the Haftorah with the uprising of the Jews against their Hellenistic Syrian oppressors. The Syrians did not want to annihilate the Jews, but they wanted them to forget their spiritual heritage and become part of the Hellenistic culture that was embraced by the whole Near East. They forbade the study of the Torah, and as a result many Jews abandoned their faith completely. The Rabbis had to act quickly to educate the people in their Jewish heritage. They therefore substituted the reading of the Prophets for the reading of the Torah. Because of the similarity between the selection from Prophets and the weekly Torah reading, the Jews retained the knowledge of the Torah portions. For some reason the Syrians did not object to the reading of Prophets. In their eyes these were historical works and contained no religious doctrine. The Hellenists long ago passed from the stage of history, but their oppression of the

Jewish religion has, ironically, enriched and beautified our religious services.

Rav Soloveitchik considered the introduction of the Haftorah as a parallel to the introduction of Kaddish. The Haftorah, just like Kaddish, was introduced to strengthen the faith of the ordinary Jew during the Second Commonwealth. This explains the great number of blessings after the reading of the Haftorah. These blessings, just like Kaddish, deal with the Messianic Era.

As the various textual versions of the liturgy developed and the various customs took shape, Rav Soloveitchik has pointed out, we often deviated from the law and permitted halakhic breaches. One of the laws is that we are not permitted to quote incomplete verses. Each verse forms an entity that is not to be altered, unless a teacher is instructing students. The Rav pointed out that too often we ignore this halakhic ruling.

Most of us commence the Sabbath evening Kiddush by saying **יום הששי ויכלו השמים** (“the sixth day: the heavens...were completed”), even though **יום הששי** (“the sixth day”) is only a fragment of a verse. Rav Soloveitchik used to say the whole verse.

In the Shabbos morning Kiddush, many people start with the words **על כן** (“therefore”), even though a glance at the Torah would convince them that this is the middle of a verse.

When we return the Torah scroll to the ark, most people recite the words **וזאת התורה** (“And this is the Torah”), a passage which ends with the words **על פי ה' ביד משה** (“in accordance with Hashem's command through Moses”). However, this again is only part of a verse. Rav Soloveitchik used to omit this ending.

Each blessing has a special text coined by the Rabbis of the Talmud, and this text should never be changed. Rav Soloveitchik adhered strictly to this rule. In most congregations outside Israel, when the Priestly Blessing is recited on Holy Days, the conclusion of the previous blessing, **הַמַּחְזִיר שְׂכִינָתוֹ לְצִיּוֹן** (“Who returns His presence to Zion”) is changed to **שְׂאוֹתָךְ לְבֹדֵךְ בִּירָאָה נַעֲבֹד** (“because it is You alone Whom we worship”). Rav Soloveitchik objected to this change. The conclusion of the blessing was established to be **וְתַחֲזִינָה** (“May our eyes behold”). This conclusion cannot be changed arbitrarily several times a year.

Though Rav Soloveitchik corrected these “errors” in his synagogue, most worshipers continue the practice of their ancestors. Still, discussing these issues will contribute to a better understanding of our liturgy.

In this book we have explored one of the most fundamental practices in Judaism: prayer. I hope that the discussions in this book will raise questions in the mind of the reader, impart a deeper understanding of the prayers, and transform the time set aside for prayers into the highlight of one’s daily activities. The fact that in recent years many books have been written and published on prayer shows that many contemporary Jews look to these prayers for guidance in difficult times. The ideas expressed in this volume are meant to strengthen the dedication and faith of the reader. In place of a formal conclusion, we will discuss some *midrashim* concerning King David.

According to the Talmud, King David asked the Almighty to let him know the date of his death, the age that he would reach. The Almighty refused his request. However, God did let him know that his life would come to an end on a Shabbos (based on Psalm 39). What good did it do David to know that he would die on a Shabbos? This information made it possible

for him to study Torah all Shabbos long, making it impossible for the angel of death to claim his soul. The rest of the week David could engage in his usual activities without anxiety. Does that mean that David could acquire immortality' by warding off the angel of death on Shabbos?

God did not promise any human being eternal life and King David was no exception. The story does not speak about David as a person; he was fated to die. Here David becomes a symbol for the Jewish people. The issue here is whether it is possible to cheat death and continue one's existence after God determines that our time has come to leave this world.

It is indeed possible to extend a life indefinitely. If we study Torah and refrain from sin, we can stave off the angel of death. David the person was tricked; finally distracted from his Torah study, he did die. The congregation of Israel has another fate. David, representing the Jewish people, will live forever as long as he continues to study the Torah and worship the Almighty. As long as the Jewish people remain true to God and the Torah, our covenant with God assures us an eternal existence that a single individual cannot enjoy. This idea has been demonstrated in every era of Jewish history. The Romans, for example, destroyed the Temple. They knew that as long as David, personifying the Jewish people, studied Torah, he would be immortal, so they strictly prohibited the study of the Torah. The Jews never accepted this Roman edict. Their spiritual leaders courageously faced death, but they kept the torch of Torah study burning. This is why David, as a symbol of the Jewish people, knew that as long as the people continued with the study of the Torah, they were invincible and would live forever. Emperor Hadrian outlawed Torah study, but the ten martyrs ignored this and bestowed immortality upon Israel.

Any Jew who opens a Siddur, enters a synagogue, attends a Talmud lecture, or listens to the reading of the Torah blocks the path of the angel of death and prevents him from destroying the Jewish people. When David learns Torah, there is no final solution. The dialogue between David and God is our prescription for Israel's immortality. Millions may have died, but we will never cease to exist.

When the First Temple was dedicated by King Solomon, he was ready to bring the Ark into the Holy of Holies to signify the fact that the Shekhinah dwelled in the midst of Israel. However, the gates of the sanctuary were stuck together, and no power on earth could open them. After the Jewish people had sacrificed so much to build such a magnificent building as an expression of their relationship to God, the Almighty rejected the Temple as the abode for His Divine Majesty. In desperation Solomon turned to God and begged Him not to reject His anointed one and to remember the loyalty of David. Immediately the gates were thrown open and the Ark could be placed in its proper place.

I would like to suggest a reason for the events on that fateful day. Solomon may have thought that his deed had brought the Jewish people close to God. The Almighty therefore taught him a lesson: It was not because of *his* piety and learning that Jerusalem was chosen as the site of the Temple, but rather because of David's lifelong dedication to God.

The Frankonian Jews had a saying that expresses our philosophy of life in a simple way: *Wer sich geniert zu essen und zu oren ist auf dieser und auf jener welt verloren* ("Whoever is too shy to eat or to pray is lost in this world and the next world").

Jews had been living in Frankonia (the northern part of Bavaria) for over one thousand years; there were 125 Jewish communities there until the Holocaust. They led a simple life. Kitzingen, my home town, was in Frankonia. Most Jews eked out a simple living as cattle dealers and small traders because they were not permitted to engage in any other profession. The authorities went so far to prohibit the establishment of any new Jewish family in town, so if a Jewish couple wanted to get married, they had to wait for another family to die first.

The Jews of Frankonia were constantly driven from town to town since the Middle Ages, and they had to find living quarters in the small villages surrounding the larger cities. Simple folk, they were determined to remain faithful to the Jewish religion and to hand down their traditions to future generations. Usually the rabbi was in charge of a larger community and its surrounding towns, and it was his obligation to make sure that there was no child without a Jewish education.

It was a difficult life, but it had its rewards. Those rewards were, primarily, the hours spent in shul and words of wisdom the Rabbonim taught them. In 1861, emancipation came even to the Frankonian Jews, who had had such a restricted life. Of course, the Frankonian Jews were "free" only for about seventy years.

The Nazis did not find it difficult to reawaken the anti-Semitic feelings and hatred of the general population. The majority of Frankonian Jews were what we today call "Orthodox." But in those days, "Orthodox," "Conservative," and "Reform" did not mean much. They just loved Hashem and were ready to accept any sacrifice for Him.

American Jews are not restricted in any way, and we must be grateful for this. Many of the students in the Hebrew day

schools are the descendants of Frankonian Jews who emigrated to America in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth. They must have heard from their parents and grandparents how important Judaism was in their lives. I think that the rapid growth of Hebrew day schools, and their success in influencing today's youth, is certainly a result of the determination of the Frankonian Jews to remain loyal to Hashem no matter what.

Until the Holocaust, it was more or less accepted that the main enemy of the Jewish people was assimilation. The Jewish people lost more people by assimilation than by pogroms. After the decimation of the Jewish people, those proportions changed. As an example of the loss of a Jewish family, let us look at Heinrich Heine. He was the scion of a well-known Jewish banking family and was born around the beginning of the nineteenth century in Dusseldorf. At that time, Dusseldorf was under French administration, and Jews were comparatively free.

As a youth, Heine was not interested in Jewish tradition but tried to become part of German culture. He loved everything German, although he never denied that he was Jewish. He was one of Germany's greatest poets. Even today, we cannot help but admire his beautiful rhymes.

All this changed when Germany occupied Dusseldorf and sent "Jews back to the ghetto." The return of Dusseldorf to Germany was the greatest misfortune in Heine's life. He felt so German and he was so enamored by Germany's thinkers and poets. His greatest aspiration was to become a professor at a German university, but he knew he had to pay a price for that. He bought a ticket of admission into German society: baptism. This betrayal of his people did not help him, for his ambition

was never fulfilled. At the same time, Germans enjoyed his prose and his poetry, but all this did not do him any good.

Since admission into the intellectual life of Germany was denied to him, he started feeling like a Jew, and he began to appreciate the ethical code of Judaism. He began to write poems on Jewish themes. One of these was "Lorelei." It was put to music, and every German sang it. Even the Nazis could not force the people to abandon the joy of this poem, so the Nazis simply called it a folk song.

In German legend, Lorelei was a woman who sat upon the hills surrounding the Rhine River and sang. The sailors of the Rhine who heard her would lose sight of where they were, and many of them shipwrecked and died. In my opinion, this fable was an allegory for the fate of the Jewish people. Lorelei symbolizes German culture. In enjoying German culture, Jews lost sight of their Judaism and became "shipwrecked." Thousands of Jews lost their continuity with Jewish culture and spiritual values of Judaism.

In the United States, many Jews mistakenly think that there is no price for admission to American culture. Indeed, baptism is not demanded of us, but ignorance, intermarriage, lack of education, and imitation of Christian ways can lead to the same results. Today, many Jewish leaders are worried that in a generation or two we might share Heine's fate. But we do not have to pay a price of admission to Judaism. This is our birthright. We need not follow other peoples' cultures, and we have no reason to be ashamed of our past. On the contrary, the roots of Western civilization are found in our sacred literature. If we understand our own traditions, it can bring us closer to God and a sense of fulfillment. That is more than enough to satisfy our yearning for spirituality and closeness to a people who have lived beyond time.