

A Guide to Jewish Prayer

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Introduction

The Jewish people have faced persecution throughout the ages, and each generation has overcome many difficulties. There have, however, been several periods in history when Jewish communities have flourished. Those periods can be referred to as "Golden Ages of Judaism." There is general agreement that the Jews in Spain, under the Moorish rule, were able to develop their skills in many fields, such as government, poetry, philosophy, and language. Their achievements in this age are well known, and Jews today enjoy the legacy of their accomplishments.

I have classified the years from 1933 to 1939 as another Golden Age in Jewish history. You might think it strange to refer to those years as a Golden Age. Are they not the beginning of the Hitler period, years of tragedy, the years that immediately preceded the Holocaust?

They were years in which the Jewish people were deprived of all basic rights and classified as second-class citizens. I lived through these years and think of them very often. Hitler came to power, and we knew there was no future for the Jewish people in Germany. We knew that the history of a thousand years in Europe had come to an end.

Always hopeful, we believed that we might escape. We thought our youth could be trained in skills that would help them to establish a new life in the free world. We thought the older generation would spend the last few years of their lives in comparative ease, living on their savings and hoping for a peaceful future. We thought that middle age people would easily be able to emigrate and start life anew.

The most significant aspect of this period, however, was our ability to study Jewish texts and observe the great spiritual heritage of our ancestors. The political oppression of those

2 A Guide to Jewish Prayer

years might have frustrated most people in the world, but it did not frustrate the Jews in Germany, who, in spite of all the obstacles, difficulties, and hardships, dedicated all their free time to learn Torah, in the widest sense of the word.

I personally studied in those years at the great Telshe Yeshiva and Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. My father, זצ"ל ("of blessed memory"), passed away in 1935, and the community invited me to become his successor. I was of the opinion that I had years of spiritual work ahead of me. In those years the Nazi dictatorship did not interfere with Jewish studies as long as we did not interfere with the Nazi plans for the future.

Suddenly, everyone in my congregation wanted to learn תורה שבכתב (the written word of Torah) and תורה שבעל פה (the oral law of Torah). They wanted to attend classes in the many fields of Jewish scholarship. They also wanted to improve their knowledge of English and modern Hebrew. They believed that these languages would make it easier for them to adjust in the countries to which they would immigrate.

I was busy every hour of the day, and what happened in my congregation happened all over Germany. The most assimilated Jews wanted to increase their knowledge of Jewish studies. There was a tremendous search for knowledge that was unequaled in all Jewish history. Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Leo Baeck, to name a few, were leading scholars of this renaissance of Jewish learning.

In the Orthodox community, the Munks, the Wohlgemuths, the Cohens, the Breuers, the Biberfelds, the Freimans, the Carlebachs, and many others taught Talmud virtually all day long. We did not think of the dangers ahead of us, and we continued on the path that we set for ourselves.

The highlight of the week in every community was the weekly sermon of the rabbi. Today, people are rarely eager to

hear rabbis' sermons. In those days, nobody wanted to miss one word of the rabbis' ideas, both in the Orthodox community and in the Liberal congregations. Some of the sermons I delivered in those days are still fresh in my mind.

For my part, I was not eager to lecture, because I knew that any gentile in town could abruptly order me to stop propagating my "revolutionary ideas." In large communities like Berlin, where there were close to 200,000 Jews, delivering a sermon was very dangerous because the Gestapo sent their spies into synagogues to find out whether the rabbi said anything unfavorable about Hitler or the Nazis. The rabbi would never know who was listening to him, and each sermon he delivered was recorded by the Nazi spies. Those men, such as Rabbis Joachim Prinz or Max Nussbaum from prewar Berlin, actually risked their lives every time they spoke. We, in our naivete, thought that this lifestyle, in which the love of learning was so powerful and great, would continue for a few years and that we rabbis and other teachers had a great task ahead of us. There were very few eras in history where a total commitment to learning was the guiding light.

One Shabbos, I overheard people discussing the depression they suffered because of the uncertainty of the future. This inspired me to deliver sermons that were geared to restoring their courage, self-confidence, and hope for the future. One sermon I delivered has stayed with me ever since.

I began by quoting Parshas Vayetze, where Rashi asks about the verse, *ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה* ("And Jacob went out of Beersheva and went to Haran").¹ Why does it say, "And Jacob went out of Beersheva"? It would have been sufficient just to say, "And Jacob went to Haran." Thus we see

¹ בראשית כח:י (Gen. 28:10)

that the departure of a righteous person from a city leaves a deep impression. As long as the righteous person lives in the city, the city enjoys his glory and fame. The moment that the righteous person leaves the city, the city loses its importance and greatness.

Starting with this interpretation of Rashi, I stated that our emigration from Germany would make a great impression; it would turn Germany, a country of scientific achievements, into a second-rate community. Sermons of this nature boosted peoples' self-confidence and gave them the strength to live through those difficult years. Our emigration from Germany was Germany's loss.

On another occasion, I raised the question, why is the second book of the Torah, Exodus, called Shemot in Hebrew, which literally means "Names"? Is it not strange that the Hebrew name given to each book of the Holy Scriptures is the first word of that book, without any connection to the context of the chapter or book as a whole? Sometimes we can find a connection in the choice of names. Bereshit (Genesis), which literally means "In the beginning," is the first word of the Torah and explains to us what the *parshah* (section) is all about. However, what does "Names" have to do with the second book of the Torah?

The Hebrew word not only means "names" but also the "fame and glory" of a people. Therefore, I explained that Shemot is the book that shows how a despised people became, with the help of God, the chosen people of Israel.

When the Jews were in Egypt, many were abused, insulted, beaten, and murdered. By the time the narrative moved from the Exodus from Egypt to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, everyone spoke with great awe of the Jewish people. Suddenly they had turned into the most important society in the ancient world. We can therefore translate Shemot as "the Book of the

Name of Israel”: how oppressed slaves became the nation that God chose to lead humanity from darkness into light, from oppression to liberty.

I addressed the congregation, saying, “Today we are the despised people of Israel. Tomorrow we will yet be the chosen people of God.” I told them, “The short period of servitude will be turned into the era of a super nation of Israel that would set an example for the rest of the human race.” I predicted that history would repeat itself. It took courage to say these words in those days, but it made life tolerable for the Jews of Germany in those terrible years.

Sometimes I substituted words of reprimand for those sermons of encouragement. For instance: when the Jews were safe in Egypt, they listened to Moshe and the laws that he taught them. They had the courage to defy the power of Pharaoh, as they showed Moshe great respect and appreciated their ancestors’ philosophy. After crossing the Red Sea, they sang the famous Song of the Sea, which expressed the closeness of Israel to God: “And Israel saw the powerful hand that God unfolded in Egypt, the people feared God, and they believed in God and in Moshe.”² Soon after, the Jewish people said to Moshe, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us to bring us out of Egypt?”³

Before crossing the Red Sea, the Jews listened to Moshe as God commanded them. The attitude of the Jewish people changed tremendously, however, once they crossed the Red Sea. They refused to listen to Moshe and carry out his

² שמות יד:לא (Ex. 14:31)

³ שמות יד:יא (Ex. 14:11)

6 A Guide to Jewish Prayer

commands. It says in the Torah, ויסע משה את ישראל (“He made Israel travel”).² Moshe was in a rush, but the Jewish people were in no rush to arrive at Mount Sinai. They were busy picking up the booty of the Egyptian army. Moshe had to use all his persuasion to have them follow him to Mount Sinai.

I told my congregants: it seems that the Jews have not changed much 3,000 years. When we fear our enemies, we turn to God and pray. But the moment that we cross the Red Sea, we set out on the road of assimilation and forget God.

I said, “You, my friends, must show that you are different. Today you are oppressed, so you fill the synagogues and study halls. But once you cross the line into freedom, I fear that you will go back to your old ways. Let us show the world that we love God and the Torah not only in days of distress but also in years of freedom.”

I told a nice anecdote about the famous Rothchild family in Frankfurt. The Rothchild family overcame the poverty of the ghetto, built a beautiful palace, and had a good life. But they never strayed from the words of the Torah, and they always showed their gratitude to God for their good fortune by carrying out the laws of the Torah. In their home they had a synagogue and a מקוה (ritual bath) and everything necessary to lead a good Jewish life.

Anshel Rothchild often invited rabbis, and especially the chief leaders among the rabbis, to visit him and spend a few days with him. On one occasion he boasted somewhat about his piety. He showed his guests and the Rosh Yeshiva (dean of the yeshiva) through his house while relating to them how he maintained the Yiddishkeit of his ancestors. He expected a word of praise from the Rosh Yeshiva.

² שמות טו:כב (Ex. 15:22)

Instead of praise the Rosh Yeshiva said, "There was one commandment in the Torah that you did not keep." Reb Anshel, surprised, looked at him and said, "Which word of the Torah did I not observe?" The Rosh Yeshiva answered with a smile, "*But Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked.*"⁴ Here the Torah tells us," the Rosh Yeshiva continued, "that when Jews are successful they go back on the road of assimilation. You, Reb Anshel, waxed fat. But you have never yet broken a law of the Torah willingly."

Then I concluded, "Today we are looked down upon and threatened with extinction. Let us be like Anshel Rothchild; when God's kindness will have redeemed us, let us carry on with the life of Torah and its commandments, learning and scholarship. May God grant us the wisdom to continue in these ways even when we will again be a free nation. "And a Redeemer will come to Zion and to the people among Israel who turn away from sin."⁵ This is a prophecy of God. We have anxiously been waiting for the coming of the Redeemer. May we all live through these years of oppression and hardship and lead a life based on the words of the Torah.

Unfortunately, the scholarship of the years 1933 to 1939 did not grant us the freedom that we desired. The tragedy of the Holocaust followed those years of second-class citizenship. But those years will always show the tremendous potential of the Jewish community.

Some thirty years ago the principal of Maimonides School in Boston, Rabbi Moses J. Cohn, זצ"ל, asked me to develop and teach a course on prayer. We called it Be'urei Hatefilah, or

⁴ דברים לב:טו (Deut. 32:15)

⁵ ישעיה נט:כ (Isa. 59:20)

8 A Guide to Jewish Prayer

“Explanations of the Prayers.” It was to be taught from eighth through twelfth grades. For the senior class I outlined a special program that was a comprehensive review of the entire course. The students were also asked to present a term paper on a subject of their choice.

It is amazing how often former students, sometimes those who graduated more than a generation ago, come to me to discuss a detail they remember from the course. Some made it a ritual to go over their notes with their families. They often assure me that of all of their religious studies, Be'urei Hatefilah was the one that helped them the most in life. It made the hours spent in shul more meaningful, and helped them establish a more intimate relationship with the Almighty.

Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (the Rav), זצ"ל, enthusiastically endorsed the course and stated that no student could graduate from Maimonides School without passing it. The Rav encouraged me to discuss with him all problems that might arise in teaching this course. I took ample advantage of his invitation to consult him. I usually asked him questions in the morning when I had the privilege to drive him to and from shul. The Rav's interpretations and explanations thus became a major part of my understanding of prayer.

Why was the Rav so interested in Be'urei Hatefilah? Most likely it was because his soul thirsted for closeness to God, ה' (Hashem). On one occasion, when he had resumed teaching his classes at Maimonides after serious abdominal surgery, he expressed his frustration with many of our brothers and sisters who go into surgery without a last-minute appeal to God to crown the effort of the surgeon with success.

“It is the gentiles,” the doctors told him, “who muster all their feelings to get God's assistance in their difficult ordeal.”

“What a disgrace!” the Rav exclaimed. “We Jews, who taught the world to pray, have forgotten this art. For this

reason," he explained, "I shall dedicate my Saturday evening classes to relearning the true meaning of prayer." It was indeed a year of great discoveries and spiritual heights.

The Rav often visited the classes in religious subjects. The Rav did not attend these classes to criticize the instructors but rather to determine the academic standing of that particular class. One day I had prepared a test for my senior students, and the Rav entered the class to listen to the lesson. I quickly explained the situation to him. "Just give me a copy of the test," the Rav said, and left the room. A few weeks later he called me and said, "By the way, I gave your test to my senior rabbinical students. None of them could answer all the questions. It is a good course."

Naturally, I read and studied all books and sources on prayer that were available to me. The German Jewish movement, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, consistently dealt with this crucial subject. The study of prayer started in Germany in the nineteenth century as a result of the development of the Reform and Conservative movements, which started during this period. As these movements appeared on the stage of Jewish history, they promoted the study of prayer. On the one hand, Reform and Conservative Jews wanted to show that our prayers were not always a part of our heritage; what was not original could be eliminated. They disliked long prayers, as well as prayers in Hebrew; they preferred sermons. Thus they attempted to demonstrate that their reforms were legitimate.

On the other hand, the Orthodox college tried to show that every element of the traditional prayer service was essential, that we have no right to institute changes or omissions. Great scholars appeared in Germany to grapple with this subject. We no longer know the first names of these men, but their family

10 A Guide to Jewish Prayer

names were Berliner, Landshut, and Sachs; they were all strictly Orthodox. One of the last scholars in Germany was the late Dr. Ismar Elbogen. Although he was a Reform scholar, he was always fair and thorough when he transmitted the Orthodox point of view. His contributions were based on the works of many scholars and are now available in an excellent Hebrew translation, התפילה בישראל (*Hatefilah B'Yisrael*). Rav Soloveitchik said to me, "Read his books. Study his books. He is very traditional in his approach. He is very clever and he made very valuable contributions to the study of prayer." Yitzhak Baer was another early German-Jewish Orthodox scholar. His classic commentary on the prayers, עבודת ישראל (*Avodas Yisrael*), is an important work.

This book, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, is an outgrowth of my Be'urei Hatefilah course and is meant to be a companion volume to the Siddur, or prayer book. The systematic reading of this volume, and an occasional review of it, should keep the meaning of the prayers fresh in the mind of the reader.

This book is not meant to make new discoveries in the study of the prayers, but rather to keep the *kavanah* (concentration) of its students at a high level. Since the purpose of this book is to inspire the reader, I did not feel it necessary to list the sources of my ideas (the rabbinic sources found in talmudic literature will be cited in the footnotes). My method was to review most of the literature on the various prayers and present a thorough summary of the issues that that would be most interesting to the reader. As noted before, in most cases I have presented the philosophy of Rav Soloveitchik.