

glorify Him; My father's God, and I will exalt Him."¹ Consequently our liturgy must ever respond to a double demand; it must throb with the spirit of continuity with our great past, to make us feel one with our fathers of yore; and it must express clearly and fully our own views and needs, our convictions and our hopes.

¹ Ex. XV, 2.

CHAPTER XLII

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF PRAYER

1 Prayer is the expression of man's longing and yearning for God in times of dire need and of overflowing joy, an outflow of the emotions of the soul in its dependence on God, the ever-present Helper, the eternal Source of its existence. Springing from the deepest necessity of human weakness, the expression of a momentary wish, prayer is felt to be the proud prerogative of man as the child of God, and at last it becomes adoration of the Most High, whose wisdom and whose paternal love and goodness inspire man with confidence and love.

2. Every prayer is offered on the presumption that it will be heard by God on high. "O Thou that hearest prayer, unto Thee doth all flesh come," sings the Psalmist.¹ No doubt of the efficacy of prayer can arise in the devout spirit. There can be only the question whether, and how far, the Deity can allow its decrees to be influenced by human wishes. Childlike faith anticipates divine interference in the natural order at any time, because it has not yet attained the conception of a moral order in the universe and, therefore, expects from prayer also miraculous effects on life. As the Deity can suddenly send or withhold rain or drought, barrenness or birth, life or death, so the inference is that the man of God can do the same with his prayer. This is the point of view of the Biblical and Talmudic periods, as well as of the entire ancient world. It seems almost childish to our religious consciousness when,

¹ Ps. LXV, 3. See Wm. James: *Varieties of Rel. Experience*, 463-477; Foster: *Function of Religion*, 183-185; Abelson: *Jewish Mysticism*, p. 15 and elsewhere.

space, omniscient, unchangeable in will and action, by the prayer of mortals. Prayer can exert power only over the relation of man to God, not over God Himself. This indicates the nature and purpose of prayer. Man often feels lonely and forlorn in a world which overpowers him, to which he feels superior, and yet which he cannot master. Therefore he longs for that unseen Spirit of the universe, with whom alone he feels himself akin, and in whom alone he finds peace and bliss amid life's struggle and unrest. This longing is both expressed and satisfied in prayer. Following the natural impulse of his soul, man must pour out before his God all his desires and sighs, all the emotions of grief and delight which sway his heart, in order that he may find rest, like a child at its mother's bosom. Therefore the childlike mind believes that God can be induced to come down from His heavenly heights to offer help, and that He can be moved and influenced in human fashion. The truth is that every genuine prayer lifts man up toward God, satisfies the desire for His hallowing presence, unlocks the heavenly gate of mercy and bliss, and bestows upon man the beatific and liberating sense of being a child of God. The intellect may question the effect of prayer upon the physical, mental, or social constitution of man, or may declare prayer to be pious self-deception. The religious spirit experiences in prayer the soaring up of the soul toward union with God in consecrated moments of our mortal pilgrimage. This is no deception. The man who prays receives from the Godhead, toward whom he fervently lifts himself, the power to defy fate, to conquer sin, misery, and death. "The Lord is nigh to all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth."¹

6. To pray, then, is to look up to God and to pour out before Him one's wishes, thoughts, sorrows, and joys. Certainly the All-knowing does not require to be told by us what we desire

¹ Ps. CXLV, 18.

or what we need. "For there is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether."¹ But we mortals merely aspire toward Him who bears the world on His eternal arms, to express in His presence our agony and our jubilation, because we are certain of His paternal sympathy. When we praise and extol Him for the happiness and the many pleasures which He has granted us, He becomes the Partaker and Protector of our fortune, just as He is our sympathetic Helper when we cry out to Him under the burden of sin or grief, in the anxiety of danger or of guilt. Every genuine prayer realizes deeply the truth of the words, "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain thee."²

7. Self-expression before God in prayer has thus a double effect; it strengthens faith in God's love and kindness, as well as in His all-wise and all-bountiful prescience. But it also chastens the desires and feelings of man, teaching him to banish from his heart all thoughts of self-seeking and sin, and to raise himself toward the purity and the freedom of the divine will and demand. The essence of every prayer of supplication is that one should be in unison with the divine will, to sum up all the wishes of the heart in the one phrase, "Do that which is good in Thine own eyes, O Lord."³ On the other hand, only the prayer which avoids impure thoughts and motives can venture to approach a holy God, as the sages infer from the words of Job, "There is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure."⁴

8. Every prayer, teach the sages, should begin with the praise of God's greatness, wisdom, and goodness, in order that man should learn submission and implicit confidence before he proffers his requests.⁵ While looking up to the divine Ideal

¹ Ps. CXXXIX, 4.

² Ps. LV, 23.

³ Ber. 29 b; Tos. Ber. III, 7; comp. Albo: *Ikkarim*, IV, 24.

⁴ Job XVI, 17; Ex. R. XXII, 4; comp. Schechter: *Aspects*, 228.

⁵ Ab. Z. 76.

of holiness and perfection, he will strive to emulate Him, and seek to grow ever nearer to the holy and the perfect. But only when he prays with and for others, that is, in public worship, will he realize that he is a member of a greater whole, for then he prays only for that which advances the welfare of all. "He who prays with the community," say the rabbis, "will have his prayer granted."¹

Another saying of theirs is that he who prays should have his face directed to the sanctuary, and when he stands on its sacred precincts, he should turn his face toward the Holy of Holies.² By this they meant that the attitude of the suppliant should ever be toward the highest, making the soul soar up to the Highest and Holiest in reverent awe and adoration, transforming the worshiper into a new character, pure from all dross.

9. Therefore prayer offered with the community upon the sanctified ground of the house of God exerts a specially powerful influence upon the individual. In the silent chamber the oppressed spirit may find calm and composure in prayer; but the pure atmosphere of heavenly freedom and bliss is attained with overwhelming might only by the united worship of hundreds of devout adorers, which rings out like the roaring of majestic billows: "The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him."³ The familiar strains from days of yore touch the deep, long-silent chords of the heart, and awaken dormant sentiments and repressed thoughts, endowing the soul with new wings, to lift itself up toward God, the Father, from whom it had felt itself alienated. In the ardor of communal worship the traditional words of the prayer-book obtain invigorating power; the heart is newly strengthened; the covenant with heaven sealed anew. To such communal prayer, which springs from the heart, the rabbis refer the Biblical words, "to serve Him with the whole

¹ Ber. 8 a.² Ber. 30 a.³ Hab. II, 20.

heart."¹ The synagogal worship exerts an ennobling influence upon the spirit of the individual as well as that of the community. For after all the main object is that the soul which aspires toward God may learn to find God. "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found; call ye upon Him while He is near."² No man is so poor as he who calls in agony: "O God!" and to whom neither the heaven above nor the heart within answers, "Behold, God is here." Nor is any man so rich with all his possessions as he who realizes, like the Psalmist, that "the nearness of God is the true good," and imbued with this thought exclaims, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And beside Thee I desire none upon earth."³

¹ Sifre Deut. 41.² Isa. LV, 6.³ Ps. LXXIII, 25, 28.