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# Book Review

Tzvee Zahavy, *God's Favorite Prayers* (Talmudic Books, Teaneck, New Jersey, 2011), 157 pp.

Tzvee Zahavy reintroduces the traditional prayer service to anyone who has ever been in a synagogue, from the most devout to the most irreverent, and even to those who are not Jewish. He seeks to breathe life and a variety of contemporary flavors into a set of prayers that often seem to be boring, ritualistic, and irrelevant. Zahavy does so by presenting the people in the synagogue not as a *minyan* (although he does that, too), but rather as six personalities or archetypes whom he identifies as (1) the performer, (2) the mystic, (3) the scribe, (4) the priest, (5) the meditator, and (6) the celebrity. In each case, Zahavy describes the personality in an abstract way and then identifies a person who personifies the personality, in some cases the people whom he admires most and who directly influenced his life.

Zahavy's volume covers the structure of synagogue worship, examines the prayer service as a theatrical event, complete with a theatrical dramatis personae and as a concert consisting of many instruments, and elaborates his points with discussions of some of the religious highpoints of his life, including biographical highlights of some of the people who molded his character and his methods and approaches to religion and scholarship.

## The Perfect Prayer and House of Worship

The author's vignettes of his youth present Zahavy as a "regular" kid, even if he was a bit more regularly in the synagogue than most, as the son of a pulpit rabbi. Zahavy's quest for the "perfect prayer" and the most perfect religious experience is a remarkably moving and creative piece of literature. Zahavy reveals that he was an amateur surfer and compares his quest for perfection in the realm of prayer to a surfer's quest for the perfect wave. Zahavy's is a moving and artistic presentation of the spiritual quest, and that alone makes this book worth reading.

## The Performer's Prayers—the Dramatis Personae

Ironically, Zahavy, the son of a leading pulpit rabbi in his day, makes a point of omitting the rabbi from his dramatis personae of the synagogue, an accurate reflection of traditional Jewish law. While, for instance, a member of the clergy—or some other functionary—has to sign the marriage license for a secular ceremony, in Judaism two lay people suffice for signing the *ketubah*. At the same time, Zahavy goes to great lengths to discuss the role of the cantor, and this despite the fact that, for reasons that go beyond the purview of the book and this review, the trend in most traditional synagogues today is towards lay rather than professional leaders of synagogue services. And Zahavy introduces the synagogue's

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Torah reader as one role that "everyone in the community gets to play at least one time," at their bar mitzvah or, in non-Orthodox services, bat mitzvah as well.

In this chapter Zahavy describes the iconic Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as a master performer and, more specifically, he provides the reader with clear examples of the rabbi's pedagogy.

**The Mystic's Prayers**

To introduce the "mystic" Zahavy invokes Hannah, the earliest example in the Bible of an individual reciting a prayer at a sacred shrine. Zahavy points out that, "Every successor to Hannah who prays to God in a synagogue, Temple, or anywhere [else] engages in an analogous mystical act and shares in the belief that his or her words or thoughts somehow unacoustically travel to God's ear." Most commonly, references to "mystics" in Jewish literature refer to the *kabbalah* and often to the people who authored or mastered the *Zohar*. Zahavy's choice of Hannah for this role expands the term "mystic" to people who are not accomplished kabbalists and further asserts that the domain of the mystics is not limited to men. Zahavy goes out of his way to claim that the synagogue and its prayers are for women just as well as for men. He goes so far as to say he is, "... not at all happy with the segregation of the sexes in the Orthodox synagogue," an exclamation that alerts the reader to ponder that here may be a somewhat unorthodox Orthodox Jew. But Zahavy does not digress into that issue in this book.

**Mythical Discourse**

According to Zahavy, "... in the disciplines of the study of religions, a myth denotes a narrative that is truer than true ... more than historical, true, or factual ... bearing special deep and timeless ... spiritual meanings of great consequence." He reminds us, with this explanation, that he wishes to make this volume accessible to non-academic readers who are more likely to be conversant with Greek mythology or with dictionary definitions that define myths as fictitious, unscientific, or imaginary. Those readers, especially traditional ones, might not be able to identify with issues that Zahavy discusses, such as the difference between a Judaic "cosmic myth" involving God and angels, as opposed to "historical myths" such as the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation of the Torah by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. This explicit discussion of the concept of myth may be a bit elementary for the advanced scholar of comparative religions. But it does clarify and extend the reach of the book to a wider lay readership that is not conversant with the discourse of scholarship in the academic history of religions.

**The Scribe's Prayers**

Zahavy describes the archetype of the scribe as a representative of the literate professionals in a community; the scribe may function in a range of settings, such as writing, maintaining and publishing books and documents; the scribe serves as a record keeper and bureaucrat. Zahavy goes so far as to point out that a scribe may serve in a commercial setting as an

accountant or a lawyer, both of whom are noted experts in regulations and codes of law. Zahavy selects the luminous Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein as an ideal scribe, in a broadened sense of this archetype. As he develops his archetypal analysis in the book, the distinctive layers and worldviews within the liturgy become more apparent. This highlights the differences within the often perceived homogeneity of the prayer book and enables a more refined understanding for those pursuing the scholarship of liturgy, for those undertaking theological discourse, and for those engaged in religious devotion.

**The Priest's Prayers**

Although priests—the Jewish *Cohanim*—today have more of a symbolic role compared to the active role they played in the days of the Temples in Jerusalem, Zahavy's discussion of priests is quite illuminating, describing the type of discipline and focus that he associates with the classic priest.

Although Zahavy's father served as a pulpit rabbi (and was not a priest genetically), Zahavy writes about his father in this section, because he feels that his father's personality personified the priestly archetype. Zahavy writes, "My father, better than anyone else I know, appreciated the formality of ritual and the probity of the agenda of the priestly archetype of prayer." Now that Zahavy has clearly defined the parameters of a priestly archetype in Judaic liturgy, scholars of Christianity for instance might be prodded into seeking the counterpart layer in their services, thus enabling a sharper and more detailed comparison and contrast of the liturgies of the two religious traditions.

**The Meditator's Prayers**

Zahavy's use of a comparative religions approach is particularly notable in his section on meditation. He contrasts a Buddhist meditator and a Jewish one, with respect to the act of meditative eating. He suggests that a knowledge of, and sensitivity to, Jewish laws renders the Jewish meditator no less effective, but far more complex, than the Buddhist one. It is not just that the Jewish meditator has to become mindful, but, according to Zahavy, "it becomes clear that she needs to become mindful *to a greater degree*, to a mathematically higher power, to be culturally analytical, almost botanical or culinary or scientific, religiously cognizant, all before she recites the blessing and puts the raisin in her mouth."

In this chapter, Zahavy discusses additionally the Kabat-Zinn approach to mindfulness. He goes on to consider the role of meditative triggers and of meditative compassion. All told, the strength of his archetypal approach for comparative purposes becomes more apparent as Zahavy shows deeper commonalities and divergences between the meditative techniques of these two particular religions, rabbinic Judaism and Buddhism.

**The Celebrity's Prayers**

Zahavy's choice of Rabbi Meir Kahane as the illustration of an archetype of the celebrity—or the "celebrity-monotheist"—is controversial. Kahane, at the end of his life, was considered

outside the mainstream of Orthodoxy, a *sui generis* personality rather than an archetype. Zahavy points out that Kahane often emphasized—some would say over-exaggerated—his concerns about anti-Semitism in the United States in order to exhort American Jews to immigrate to Israel before it would be (in his view) too late. Zahavy's description of Kahane's apocalyptic imagery is powerful, and Zahavy's illustration comparing Kahane to a key player in the sports world is clever. Zahavy does not deny Kahane's constructive role as the founder of the Jewish Defense League (JDL), in which Kahane and his followers protected Jews in New York City's high crime areas, or his contribution in a pivotal role in the struggle for the rights of Soviet Jews, and in instilling Jewish Pride in thousands of followers. But Zahavy feels that Kahane also was a warrior archetype (in addition to being a celebrity archetype) and a chauvinistic rabble rouser focusing excessively and obsessively on the dream of salvation, unlike the other five archetypes in his book. Zahavy writes: "Misdirected and misguided, religion in a triumphal mode can—and, sadly, often does—breed violence and terrorism."

In some regards, the appearance of Kahane here highlights a weakness in Zahavy's cataloging of what he sees as distinct archetypes in prayer. It does not work with Kahane, who also wrote prolifically, in a scribal mode and was a priest by lineage, and as Zahavy himself notes, he visualized his "priestly" role as "a designated high profile leader of his people with a clearly specified public mission."

Zahavy begins this chapter with an excerpt from the *Aleinu* prayer, which includes such language as "Let all the inhabitants of the world perceive and know that unto you (the God of Israel) every knee must bow, every tongue must swear.... And the Lord shall be king over all the earth...." As Zahavy sees it, this prayer articulates the purest form of the celebrity's anthem.

In closing this chapter, Zahavy discusses a significant variation to his celebrity-monotheist, in the form of Beruryah, daughter of Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradyon and wife of Rabbi Meir, whom he describes as a moderate hybrid variety of this celebrity monotheist, and who exemplifies a personality of inherent moral superiority. Here we note that a strength of Zahavy's approach is his admission that his archetypes are not pure and distinct from one another, but subject both to variations and overlaps within and among them.

**Prayer-Jacking**

Zahavy develops a tart criticism of those who invoke the historical background of the classic High Holiday prayer known as the *Unesane Tokef*. He inveighs against this on the grounds that the prayer itself is so powerful in a scribal and meditative mode that the description of the history of the liturgy in a celebrity mode is a distraction that interjects the voice of an entirely other archetype. One wonders if it is forced to describe as negative the narration of the heart-rending story of the limb-rending of Rabbi Amnon in discussing the Yom Kippur prayer that he composed, to show the extent of the selflessness of this rabbi, for his beliefs, and the importance of not hesitating to do the right thing. Zahavy points out that the Yom Kippur narrative itself spells out, in the *Eilleh Ezkrah* prayer, the narrative of the torture and murder of not one, but ten rabbis, by the Romans in Israel after the Bar Kokhba revolt, although in that case the gory details are in the prayer itself, not in a background narrative.

In this respect we can see how hard it is, after the amalgamation of disparate components into the main Jewish prayer books, the *Siddur* and *the Machzor*, to separate the strands that make up the tightly interlaced fabric of the rabbinic prayer services.

**Conclusion**

This book offers novel and convincing, fascinating and entertaining reading about not merely G-d's favorite prayers but many other prayers as well, plus aspects of the synagogue, its accouterments, its protagonists, and some of Yeshiva University's most scholarly and dynamic rabbis. The book presents mini-lectures from an original and compelling pedagogic perspective, a fresh interdisciplinary methodology that we deem successful. It interweaves vignettes from the lives of rabbis to give color to its core concepts. This adds up to a constructive, yet pithy and compact, religious and literary treasure, with the potential to open new paradigms of scholarly inquiry into liturgical texts and to forge creative avenues for innovative theology that will speak to a wide cross-section of synagogue worshippers as well as to people interested in analyzing synagogue worship.

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