# A Legacy of Learning

*Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner*

*Edited by*

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## Prayer as Visualization

In this paper, I describe several distinct visualizations that I recognize in Jewish prayers. By the term prayers, I mean the texts recited by Jews in religious ritual contexts. By the term visualizations, I mean the formation of mental visual images of a place and time, of a narrative activity or scene, or of an inner disposition. The goals of the visualizations can include: (1) professed communication with God, articulation of common religious values for (2) personal satisfaction or for (3) the sake of social solidarity, or (4) attainment of altered inner emotional states or moods.

## The Main Meta-Visualization of Prayer

The overarching meta-visualization of prayer is that the acts of recitation of prayer texts constitute a dialogue with God. The former Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Sir Jonathan Sacks, summed this up saying, "Prayer is the language of the soul in conversation with God. It is the most intimate gesture of the religious life, and the most transformative."[1]

Sacks characterized the Jewish prayer book saying, "The Siddur is the choral symphony the covenantal people has sung to God across forty centuries from the days of the patriarchs until the present day." He called it a "calibrated harmony."

This representation articulated by Sacks and many others before him is the general and foundational meta-visualization of all acts of prayer, the contextual background music in which I find the more detailed and specific visualizations that I discuss in this paper.

1 See his essay introduction to the *Koren Sacks Siddur* (Jerusalem, 2009), entitled, "Understanding Jewish Prayer."

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### Visualizations Prior to Prayer

The Talmud discusses how rabbis shifted their attention from their academic activities to move on to their ritual activity. The preparatory visualization exercises that they employed were to take place prior to the performances of prayers. The concern the rabbis show toward the goal of orienting one's attention highlights for us the overall emphasis that rabbis put on the interiority of imagery for prayer.

In a pericope in the Yerushalmi, with a close parallel in Babli, the Talmud develops on the proposal that one may start to pray only after engaging in "words of wisdom." The source gives us the following:

> [IV. A] R. Jeremiah said, "One should stand to pray only after [speaking of a] decision of the law."
> [B] R. Jeremiah said, "He who is involved with communal needs is like one who is involved [in the study of] words of Torah. [And he may pray immediately after he finishes serving a communal need]" [Y. Berakhot, Chapter 5, Mishnah 1].

The passage opens with an apparent explanation and addition to the Baraita in the Tosefta which says that one may pray after "words of wisdom." The Talmud extends this to include the suggestion that one may pray after "a decision of the law" or "involvement with communal needs." The Yerushalmi then continues with specific examples of rules that illustrate the principle of praying after speaking of a rule of law:

> [C] R. Huna said, "[Before praying one should speak of a law such as the following:] 'A woman who sees [a discharge of] a drop of blood the size of a mustard seed must sit and keep seven clean days [where she sees no discharge, then immerse herself before resuming regular marital relations].' [After reciting this law] then one may go and pray." [After reciting this stringent decision one will be able to turn one's attention away from further deliberation on the laws of the Torah.]
> [D] Zeira bar R. Hinenah said, "[Before praying one should speak of a law such as the following:] 'One who lets blood from animals dedicated to the Temple [and uses the blood for ordinary purposes] has misappropriated Temple property.' This too is one of the [stringent] fixed laws [which one may recite to divert his thoughts from his studying before praying]."
> [E] We learned: Bar Qappara said, "[Recite this stringent law before praying:] 'The [minimum number of] eleven days [which by law one must

reckon] between one menstrual period and another, is based on a tradition received by Moses at Sinai.' " [A woman who saw a flow in any of the eleven days after the seven days of her menstrual period, must reckon that to be the flow of a Zabah, subject to a stricter law of abstinence. S.H.][2]
[F] We learned: R. Hoshaia [said], "[Recite this lenient law before praying:] 'A person may mix his grain with stalks [before bringing it into his storehouse] as an artifice to free it from the tithing requirement [since thereby it will resemble grain which has not been winnowed, which does not become liable to tithes when brought into storage].' " [According to Hoshaia, reciting a lenient law puts one in the proper frame of mind for prayer.][3]

The Babylonian Talmud has a slightly different version of this pericope:

[A] Our rabbis have taught:
[B] They may not stand to pray after judging [a case], or after [discussing] a matter of law, but only after [speaking of ] a decided law.[4]
[C] What is an example of a decided law [which one may speak of before reciting his prayer]?
[D] Said Abaye, "[It is a law] like that of R. Zira."
[E] R. Zira said, "The women of Israel imposed stringency upon themselves. For if they observe a [discharge of a] drop of blood [even as small] as a mustard seed, they sit and observe seven clean days [during which no new discharges are observed before resuming marital relations]."[5]
[F] Raba said, "[It is a law] like that of R. Hoshaia."

2 Babli's version omits this rule. Mareh Hapenim suggests that it may be because in Babli Niddah there is an explicit dispute over the rule between R. Yohanan and Resh Laqish. It therefore may not be an appropriate rule on which to reflect to divert one's attention from the distractions of study before turning to prayer.

3 In Babli's version, he may mix the grain together with its own husks. In that case the rule refers to grain that has not been winnowed which is not liable yet to tithes. From the Yerushalmi's version here we may infer that the ruse to avoid tithes works even for grain that has been winnowed and has become liable to tithes. Even in that case one may mix the grain with straw and bring it into the house to avoid the obligation of tithes.

4 Rashi explains that if one deals with an undisputed law he will not be distracted to delve into it or ponder over it during his recitation of prayer.

5 They observed the more stringent law as required for a zabah who had seen discharges of blood on three consecutive days during the eleven day period between one menstrual cycle and another. See B. Nid. 66a, B. Meg. 28b.

> [G] For R. Hoshaia said, "A person may mix his grain with its chaff [before bringing it into his storehouse] so that his animal may eat it[6] and so that it will be free from the tithing requirement [since thereby it will resemble grain which has not been winnowed, and will not become liable to tithes when brought into storage].' " [According to Hoshaia, reciting a lenient law puts one in the proper frame of mind for prayer.][7]
> [H] Or if you wish, an alternative [law which one may recite before rising to pray is one] like that of R. Huna.
> [I] For said R. Huna, Said R. Zeira, "One who lets blood from animals dedicated to the Temple, one may derive no personal benefit [from the blood and one who uses the blood for ordinary purposes] has misappropriated Temple property."[8]

Putting aside the minor variations between the two versions,[9] the renditions in the Babli and Yerushalmi represent a common approach to visualization in preparation for praying. That is, one should turn to ponder certain legal rulings in order to prepare for mindset to be achieved for the recitation of prayer.

Two additional pericopae in the Yerushalmi deal with aspects of visualizations for prayer. The passage cited above from chapter 5, Mishnah 1 [IV] of Yerushalmi Berakhot continues as follows:

> [Before he went to pray,] Abdan asked Rabbi, "How many levels of holy things are there?"
> And he said to them, "Four."
> "How many levels of Heave-offering are there?"
> He said to him, "Three."
> Then [after speaking of these straightforward facts of the law, Abdan] went and prayed.

A previous text in the tractate gives us a related tradition:

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6 According to R. Ephraim in the commentary of Tosafot to B. Men. 67b, s.v. *kdy*, this is the language the householder uses for the artifice, even though he intends to use the grain for himself.

7 The obligation to tithe produce begins when one brings the grain into storage after it has been winnowed. See B. Pes. 9a, B. Men. 67b, B. Nid. 15b.

8 See B. Me. 12b.

9 Notably, Babli omits Bar Qappara's view. His opinion in Y. [E] is similar to Huna's statement in Y. [C]. Both refer to strict laws regulating sexual relations. It appears that rather than to duplicate the point, the Babli's editor simply omitted Bar Qappara's lemma.

> [VIII] Said R. Hiyya the great, "In all my days I never concentrated [properly on my Prayer.][10] One time I wanted to concentrate [properly]. So I meditated. And I said to myself, 'Who goes up first before the king? The Arkafta [a high dignitary in Persia][11] or the Exilarch?' " [He used this imagery to help him prepare for his Prayers. To induce the proper state of mind he imagined the Persian hierarchy.]
> Samuel said, "I count birds [to help me prepare for prayer]."
> R. Bun bar Hiyya said, "I count rows of bricks [in a wall to aid me in achieving the proper state of mind]." [Y. Berakhot, Chapter 2, Mishnah 4.]

Ostensibly, the Yerushalmi speaks here of various imagery used to modify a person's state of mind. In light of this latter passage in Yerushalmi Berakhot 2:4, we may explain more amply the questions attributed to Abdan in the former text from Y. Berakhot 5:1. That brief exchange between Abdan and Rabbi regarding the number of levels of holy things and of heave-offering, also served as an alternative means of visualization, in preparation for prayer.

With the main texts before us, the following additional issues concerning the Talmudic conception of visualizations for prayer need to be resolved:

1 The connection between *kavvanah* and speaking or thinking of undisputed legal sayings
2 The value for a person to think of a legal decision prior to praying
3 The rationale for choosing the three or four specific rules cited in the passage
4 The grounds for the dispute between Abaye, Raba, and the alternate opinion in Babli. [In Yerushalmi: between Huna, Hoshaia, Bar Qappara and Zeira.]
5 The conceptual difference between the views of the Baraita in the Talmud [which recommends attention be paid to undisputed laws prior to prayer] and the regulations of Mishnah [which refers to "a solemn disposition"] and of Tosefta [which recommends praying after speaking of "words of wisdom"].

10 The traditional commentators naturally mitigate this statement. Pene Moshe explains that he was involved deeply in his study. Sefer Haharedim observes that it is unthinkable that such holy masters did not properly concentrate on their prayer. This must refer to instances of unavoidable disruptions of concentration.

11 See M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York, 1967), p. 73.

The connection between *kavvanah* and the act of speaking about an undisputed legal ruling (1) makes sense within the context of rabbinic culture. The Talmud in general addressed itself to the average "disciple of the sages." The ideal scholar within a rabbinic circle of learning was expected to occupy himself throughout the day with the study of Torah. This meant that his mind was expected to be constantly busy with the questions and answers, the give and take of the Talmudic argument. No doubt, for this ideal rabbinic Jew it was a difficult task to desist from the intricate deliberations of such study and to turn one's perspective to thanksgiving and praise in prayer.

The remedy prescribed by the Talmud to divert one's thoughts from rabbinic debate and logical analysis was the "undisputed legal ruling." A scholar could turn his thoughts to visualize a ruling which led him to contemplate no further debate, no questions and no answers, just a decided law. And through reflection on that law he could suppress further deliberations of study and clear his mind to properly visualize his prayers.

This is the first basic visualization concept in the main Talmudic passage that we have cited. To address the remainder of our issues we must advance more deeply into the theory behind the Talmudic dispute regarding which legal ruling one recites before turning to prayer.

Each example of undisputed laws given in the text illustrates a specific point. Abaye in the name of R. Zeira suggests that a person imagine the stringent rule regarding a woman who discharges blood leaving a stain as small as the size of a mustard seed. To interrupt thoughts of legal give and take, Abaye posits, one must picture an especially strict rule. This breaks one's train of thought in learning and enables a person to turn his attention to prayer out of a humble spirit.

Raba believed that one should not come to prayer out of humility triggered by reflection over a stringency of rabbinic restrictions. Rather he recommended another avenue to enhance the proper imagery needed for *kavvanah*. He advised the sage to consider a significant lenient rule such as an artifice to move his produce and to avoid tithes, a "tax loophole." Out of the satisfaction associated with visualizing such a benefit, one can more easily divert his thoughts from learning and turn to prayer.[12]

The third alternative of the Talmudic source provides us with another perspective on preparation for prayer. Neither the excessive lowliness associated with contemplating a strict rule, nor the gladness connected with cogitating about a lenient precept, prepares a person's mind's eye for prayer. Only

12 Another form of happiness is associated elsewhere with preparation for prayer. A baraita says, "One stands to pray . . . only out of the joy of [ fulfilling] a commandment."

meditating over a highly abstract principle of law such as the regulation that one is not permitted to let blood from an animal in the Temple, brings a person to the proper state of correct *kavvanah* for prayer.

Still, even if these interpretations of the views expressed in the Talmudic passage are correct, we have yet to clarify why those three specific legal rules appear in the text. There are numerous stringent, lenient, and abstract undisputed rules in the Talmud. By selecting these illustrations the rabbis expressed additional elements of their conceptions of visualization for prayer.

Abaye and Raba saw the disciple's personality segmented by the tensions of everyday life. Ideally he lived in the world of Talmudic ideas and arguments in the study hall. In reality he also lived in the world at large, confronted by its many distractions.

From Abaye's perspective, concern over the everyday relationships between men and women constituted the primary distraction to prayer. To alleviate this a person might turn his thoughts to visualize a drop of blood and a stringent ruling that inhibits contact between the sexes, such as we have in Babli's text.[13]

In Raba's view, mundane monetary worries were the chief sources of interference with a person's mindset for prayer. The average person, scholar or householder, rich or poor, had some measure of anxiety about money or taxes.[14] To mitigate this disquiet a person could turn his thoughts to a great leniency in the law, the notion that he may free himself of the obligation to give tithes, a burdensome fiduciary responsibility. After reflecting upon such a concept, a person could turn his attention to prayer.

According to the third alternative opinion in the Talmud, another more complex realm of daily interaction perturbed the individual and disrupted his inner contemplation. This opinion proposed that the confrontation between a person and sources of authority might have created situations of frustration and helplessness and detracted from a person's ability to pray.

In our text, the Temple stood as a symbol of a source of authority, the priests represented all bureaucracy, and the rule cited in the Talmud suggested the futility of trying to combat the system. A person who let blood from a Temple offering, did so in order to benefit the animal, not for his own personal gain. Nevertheless, the Temple administrator saw only the minute requirements of

13 The same may be said of Bar Qappara's view in Y.

14 Maimonides (in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 51) expresses this point directly: "Do not pray moving your lips with your face to the wall [as if you are engaged deeply in prayer] and all the while you are thinking of your business transaction. . . . Do not think you have achieved anything [by doing these things]."

the law. Accordingly, he declared such an action forbidden, and condemned a person who engages in it to be liable under the law.

According to this third view, out of pessimistic Temple visualizations, a person could turn his attention away from the distractions of the material world and its complex structures of authority and look with humble inner peace towards the more spiritual realms of prayer.

## Varieties of Visualizations during Prayer

Ancient rabbis had many thoughts and prescriptions on the matters of visualizations in prayer itself. They expressed them in their own idiom through direct teachings and indirectly by formulating their rituals in certain ways. A basic assumption in what the rabbis taught is that a person can and should use visualizations to alter his consciousness and to recite the different prayers. Hence starting back in antiquity, praying Jews engaged in a series of visualization exercises three times a day.

These are the varied visualizations that I associate with several major Jewish prayers.

The *scribal visualization* is the state of mind you need to attain when you study texts, when you write new materials, when you add columns of numbers, or when you conduct inventories. It is the target kavvanah for the Shema prayer, for which many Jews sit and shade their eyes so they may concentrate on reciting the designated Torah texts.

The *priestly visualization* is the state of mind you need to attain when you comport yourself for a public ritual or pageant. It is the target kavvanah for the Amidah, where the swaying that some practice is like marching in place. You do not want to get out of step as you move through the procession of praises, petitions and thanksgivings of the multi-part Amidah prayer.

The *mystical visualization* is the state of mind you need to attain to imagine yourself in another place, when your praying carries you off to the heavens in search of God or back in time to our momentous Israelite historical episodes. It is the target kavvanah for the many passages of the prayers that invoke the heavenly angels or recount the great miracles in our past, such as the crossing of the Red Sea and the revelation at Sinai.

The *triumphal visualization* is the state of mind you need to attain to imagine yourself victorious in a grand global historical contest. It is the target kavvanah for the Alenu, which declares the ultimate triumph of the one true God at the end of time.

The *performative-mindful visualization* is the state of mind you need to attain when you perform a personal ritual act. It is the target kavvanah for the many mitzvoth that a Jew performs throughout his or her life and for the recitation of blessings. Truly, all of these enumerated visualizations are mindful in their own ways. But the performative-mindful imagination takes sharp account for the here and now, the immediate physical facts of one's present circumstances, as for example at the wedding canopy, in taking the lulav and etrog, in lighting the Hanukkah menorah, the Shabbat candles, blessing the challah, and in other ritual instances.

The *compassionate-mindful visualization* is the state of mind that you seek to attain when reciting such prayers as the Tahanun, Grace after Meals or the Kol Nidre service—exercises in imagining a bond of loving-kindness with God, with oneself, and with other people.

In the next section I discuss at greater length these visualizations that I identify in the rabbinic prayers.

## Visualization Exercises

### *The Scribal Visualization: Shema*

The Mishnah discusses how to recite the short daily prayer of three paragraphs called the Shema. The rabbis prescribe how to act while you recite the texts and they debated the finer nuances of how one must ideate and when one may talk while engaged in the recitation:

> "At the breaks [between the paragraphs of the Shema] one may extend a greeting [to his associate] out of respect, and respond [to a greeting which was extended to him].
> "And in the middle [of reciting a paragraph] one may extend a greeting out of fear [of a person] and respond," the words of R. Meir.
> R. Judah says, "In the middle [of reciting a paragraph] one may extend a greeting out of fear and respond out of respect.
> "At the breaks [between reciting the paragraphs] one may greet out of respect and respond to the greetings of any man." (M. Ber. 2:1)

In my earlier analysis prior to this paper I was satisfied to explain that this liturgical law is the rabbis' way of discussing part of a religious ritual that they called kavvanah. I concluded that this is how the ancients talked about the visualization and concentration we need to attain so as to add solemnity to a prayer ritual. But it vexed me that they spoke about greetings when they

wanted to prescribe visualization necessary for the prayer. Through an anecdote I will explain how I changed my interpretation of this pericope.

While working one day at my computer, writing about Jewish prayer, my wife came in to tell me that she was going out to appointments and wanted me to know her plans for the day. "Just a minute," I said. "I do want to hear what you are saying. Please just let me concentrate to finish writing this paragraph." At that moment it became clear to me that when the rabbis spoke about kavvanah for reciting the Shema, they used a model of concentration that was familiar to a writer—to a person who is engaged in textual work, to a scholar sitting at his desk and trying to think through his complete thoughts.

In general terms, scribes work as follows. A writer needs to focus on composing a paragraph from beginning to end. Similarly, an accountant needs to finish scanning and calculating a column of numbers from top to bottom. A lawyer must complete the reasoning of the steps of an argument all the way through. A programmer must reach the end of writing a complex routine of computer code. All of those professions fit into the category of a reflective writing and calculating worker—which I roll up into the shorthand label "scribe."

### *The Priestly Visualization: Amidah*

The Mishnah prescribes as follows for reciting the Amidah prayer:

> One may stand to pray only with a solemn frame of mind.
> The early pious people tarried a while before they would pray, so that they could direct their hearts to the omnipresent God.
> While one is praying, even if the king greets him, he may not respond.
> Even if a serpent is entwined around his heel, he many not interrupt his prayer. (M. Ber. 5:1)

In earlier analysis of this pericope prior to this paper, I was satisfied to observe that it spoke in rabbinic idiom to prescribe the correct intensity-level of the *kavvanah*—the visualization—for this prayer. The Mishnah tells us that because the Amidah is a more solemn prayer than the Shema, you need to concentrate more intensely when you recite it. But it vexed me that the rabbis prescribed this kind of concentration and not some other. Why did they set forth these specifications regarding visualization for the person who is reciting the Amidah? Again, through an anecdote I will explain how I changed my interpretation of this pericope.

The insight came to me one day as I prepared for a lecture that I was to give about the meanings and purposes of the Amidah. I searched for a picture to put on a PowerPoint presentation, looking for a pose that illustrated the right

kavvanah for this prayer. I did not want to insert an image of a man standing in prayer and wrapped around in a tallit. That seemed to be a redundant cliché that did not illuminate meaning. What image would exhibit a person so intent and disciplined that he would not move, no matter how much distraction came into the context of his surroundings? And that is when I realized what this prayer-visualization demanded. I typed "palace guard" into Google's image search engine. I found and copied a picture of a stereotypical guard from Buckingham Palace in London, dressed in his red and black uniform and standing at attention. I inserted that graphic into my presentation. I wanted to show the substance of the visualization—that the priest requires a frame of mind of discipline and obedience for the recitation of the Amidah. This means a martial kind of self-possession, standing with erect posture, feet together, facing Jerusalem as specified by the rules for reciting this prayer. The person reciting the prayer needs to bow at the proper intervals, in keeping with his martial drill.

The Mishnah instructs us that not even a coiled serpent at his heel be allowed to distract a person during his recitation of the Amidah prayer; even if a serpent is nearby, he shall not pause his recitation. That means that through the priestly visualization he sees himself in authority, in soldierly control of his emotions and consciousness—not consequentially ecstatic or meditative in any particular way and yet guarded against distraction.

The visualization that one must strive for in reciting the Amidah is of a certain character and nature. Like the palace guard, the person who is engaged in this prayer visualizes a military personality, intent on particularized activities. He obeys what he is commanded to obey and deliberately ignores all other noises or intrusions into his material context.

### *The Mystical Visualization: Kaddish*

A prominent Kaddish in the synagogue is the mourner's Kaddish (Yatom), the one that is employed as a mourner's doxology, a praise of God. The practice of associating this prayer with a mourner first appears in the thirteenth century. The synagogue authorities endorsed the custom that mourners during the first eleven months after losing a close relative ought to rise and recite a Kaddish on their own. In the case of this Kaddish Yatom, the mourner rises in his place in the synagogue and recites the doxology at a few appointed times in the daily, Sabbath, and festival services.

The prayer is an apt mystical visualization for the mourner who recites it. It is a mystical prayer litany of the right words of praise of God in the correct order. The mystical visualization of the Kaddish arises out of the knowledge that those lines that cite for us the adoration of God are imagined to be

identical to the praises that are recited by the angels in heaven. Reciting the Kaddish provides an appropriate vicarious association for the mourner—to stand and recite a prayer on behalf of the departed souls of the dead:

> Magnified and sanctified
> may his great name be
> in the world he created by his will.
> May he establish his kingdom
> in your lifetime and in your days,
> and in the lifetime of all the house of Israel,
> swiftly and soon—and say: Amen.
> May his great name be blessed forever and all time.
> Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted,
> raised and honored, uplifted and lauded
> be the name of the Holy One, blessed be he,
> beyond any blessing, song, praise and consolation
> uttered in the world—and say: Amen
> May there be great peace from heaven,
> and life for us and for all Israel—and say: Amen.
> May he who makes peace in his high places,
> make peace for us and for all Israel—and say: Amen. (Koren Siddur, p. 178)

This lilting and poetic passage does have a certain unique cadence, yet it is a standard glorification of God, adding nothing about death or dying or the deceased. I posit that this prayer is especially apropos for a mourner because reciting this heavenly angelic Aramaic praise is an epitome of a mystic's liturgy. It is a stand-in visualization by the mourner on behalf of the departed loved one. The mourner stands in place in the synagogue and recites the words.

But acting in the mode of the mystic, through the appropriate visualization of the prayer, the mourner achieves a level of mystical prayer, not just addressing God with the outpourings of personal anxiety and vexation, but imagining that he or she is standing aloft in heaven, representing the soul of her beloved departed, knocking on heaven's door to seek entry for that spirit into a secure, eternal place close to the divine light and near the warmth of God.

The visualization for mystical prayer requires that one who is addressing God from his or her pew, use the words authorized by the angels on behalf of the deceased. The visualization enables for the person who recites it an imagined ascent to heaven to plead there for the soul of the departed.

### *The Triumphal Visualization: Alenu*

Performing on the world's center stage, the reciter of Alenu lets us know that he is a star member of the cast of the Chosen People. He is a confident monotheist who has an exciting story. As he tells it, the gods now are engaged in a continual conflict and competition. And, then, at some point in the future, there will be a final match when idolatry will lose. The victory will go to the one true God over his false and worthless competitors.

The person visualizing triumph recites the words that exhort everyone in the synagogue simultaneously with both vivid and vague visions of a cosmic struggle in heaven and on Earth. The Alenu tells us about the coming state of affairs for the Jewish people. Our destiny will be fulfilled at the end of time in a promised culmination. This drama is proposed in the first section of the prayer:

> It is our duty to praise the Lord of all things,
> to ascribe greatness to him who formed the world in the beginning,
> since he has not made us like the nations of other lands,
> and has not placed us like other families of the earth,
> since he has not assigned unto us a portion as unto them,
> nor a lot as unto all their multitude.
> For we bend the knee and offer worship and thanks before the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he,
> who stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth,
> the seat of whose glory is in the heavens above,
> and the abode of whose might is in the loftiest heights.
> He is our God; there is none else: in truth he is our King; there is none besides him;
> as it is written in his Torah, "And you shall know this day, and lay it to your heart that the Lord he is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath: there is none else." (Koren Siddur, p. 180)

Visualizing in this mode, the celebrant cheers on, urging his values on others like that of a team coach or captain in a locker room before a crucial game. However, there is an important vagary in this imagery. This is not yet a real game. In his synagogue prayers, the triumphal monotheist does not encourage and exhort his team of worshippers to go out in the street to trample the identified competing teams. The conclusion of the Aleinu prayer finally and forcefully proclaims the awaited details:

> We therefore hope in you, O Lord our God,
> that we may speedily behold the glory of your might,

> when you will remove the abominations from the earth,
> and the idols will be utterly cut off,
> when the world will be perfected under the kingdom of the Almighty,
> and all the children of flesh will call upon your name,
> when you will turn unto yourself all the wicked of the earth.
> Let all the inhabitants of the world perceive and know that unto you
> every knee must bow, every tongue must swear.
> Before you, O Lord our God, let them bow and fall;
> and unto thy glorious name let them give honor;
> let them all accept the yoke of your kingdom,
> and do you reign over them speedily, and forever and ever.
> For the kingdom is yours, and to all eternity you will reign in glory;
> as it is written in your Torah, "The Lord shall reign forever and ever."
> And it is said, "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day
> shall the Lord be One, and his name One."

The visualization of this prayer calls forth in the liturgy a figurative competition. It calls upon the person who recites the prayer to imagine that the ultimate showdown is nigh, to conjure a vision of the minutes ticking down at the close of the game. This vividly imagined visualization speaks of the end to the struggle at the end of time when the ultimate victory of the team of the one true God over the team of the false Gods is at hand.

### *The Performative-Mindful Visualization: Blessings*

The fixed opening phrase of a berakhah, "Blessed art thou O Lord, our God, King of the Universe," semantically expresses the speaker's intention to bestow good wishes upon God or to exalt God, who is referred to in the formula by three names. The person who recites a blessing learned this formula when he or she was two or three years old and hardly pondered the theological meaning or even the simple semantics of this phrase each time he or she recited it as an older child or as an adult.

I see an added purpose or function of the berakhah formula for the more mature reciter, whom I call a meditator. These recitations serve as the known cues for many instances of daily, periodic, repetitive, or occasional mini-mindful meditations. These provide meaningful visualizations of pauses in the rush of one's thoughts and to the meanderings of cognitive awareness.

A meditator recites individual blessings when eating foods, performing bodily functions, witnessing meteorological events, seeing flowers, or hearing good and bad news. Liturgical variants of blessings comprise many of the synagogue texts of prayer.

Here is a summary of a small sample of many of the actions and occasions for which one recites mini-meditations, blessings in daily activities.

| **Blessed are You . . .** | **Purpose** | **Meditation** |
|---|---|---|
| Who creates the fruit of the tree | Before eating a fruit | Mindful eating |
| Who creates the produce of the ground | Before eating a vegetable | Mindful eating |
| Who gives pleasant fragrance to fruits | Upon smelling fruits | Mindful sensing of nature |
| Who has withheld nothing from nature and has created in it beautiful creatures and trees for the enjoyment of human beings | Upon seeing flowering trees in their first seasonal bloom | Mindful sensing of the special beauty of nature |
| Who creates the fruit of the vine | Before drinking wine | Mindful drinking |
| Who brings forth bread from the earth | Before eating bread—a full meal | Mindful dining, for a full meal |
| Who commanded us to light the Sabbath/ holiday candles | After lighting the candles | Purposeful ritual, mindful of the passage of time |
| Who heals all flesh and performs wonders | After bathroom visits | Mindful of one's body and health |
| Whose power and might fill the world | Upon witnessing thunder or a hurricane | Mindful of disruptive events of nature |
| Who is good and does good | For good news | Mindful of elevating emotions |
| Who is the true judge | For bad news | Mindful of emotional trauma |
| Blessings in the synagogue | Opening or concluding paragraphs of liturgy | Mindful of the markers of the elements of prayer |

There are three generally mentioned classical categories for sorting out all the blessings: (1) blessings of performance of a mitzvah (ritual acts), (2) blessings

of bodily satisfaction (intake of foods, drinks, etc.), and (3) blessings of praise (liturgy).

As part performative-mindful visualization, these blessings function to demand a meditative awareness of person, body, and the immediate external world. For a simple example, a person takes the blessing he or she recites upon smelling fragrant fruit, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe who gives pleasant fragrance to fruits" (Koren Siddur, p. 1000) as a cue to be highly aware of one's surroundings. A person takes another case, the formula spoken before eating an apple, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe who creates the fruit of the tree," as a cue to mindfully savor the taste and texture of foods. In both cases, visualizations of loving kindness and compassion may accompany the awareness of the physical food.

These blessings serve as triggers. They tell the reciter to stop, to be mindful of his or her actions, to be thoughtful of what type of food is held in hand, how that food is to be regarded and classified, whether one is smelling it or eating it, and to recall what is its "correct berakhah." All forms of mindfulness intensify the practitioner's moments of experience and elevate ordinary events from a background of awareness to a foreground of thinking. Mindful occasions of blessings help one savor one's conscious awareness—the consistency and flavor, the origins and essences of living. Meir, a rabbi in the Talmud in the second century, spoke of his expectation for every Jew to experience each day one hundred triggers of mindful meditation—a life punctuated daily by one hundred blessings.

To be clear, this mindful meditation through berakhot that we have described is not identical to that which Kabat-Zinn and others teach. This mindfulness is adapted to a Jewish context. In fact, through blessings, a person engages in a form of mindfulness to the second power, mindfulness squared, that is to an intensified relationship to multiple worlds, both personal and cultural.

Let me explain. When a person holds an apple in hand and recites the blessing for it, they need to know which proper berakhah to make. That meant they have to relate first to that content from the Jewish cultural world, its law or halakhah. Still holding that apple in hand, they move through that relationship to look then at the fruit, to feel its heft and taste its tartness as they bite into it.

Mindful visualization exercises require that daily life not be defined only by the torrents of rushing thoughts. Mindful thinking is formed in a duplex relationship to that combination of both cultural and personal contents that are mindfully activated in a conscious mind, under its watchful control. Such visualization steers a person's thoughts and actions by meeting up with them, by making note of them, and then by becoming disentangled from

those twisting currents of distractions gushing around one's life. Blessing-meditation visualizations turn the rush of daily living into a series of discrete moments of experience, each savored fully with thanksgiving, gratitude, and with compassion.

### *The Compassionate-Mindful Visualization: Kol Nidre*

The legal text of Kol Nidre that Jews recite at the outset of Yom Kippur is actually a vivid emotional liturgical visualization of meditative intent. The worshipper announces the central theme of Yom Kippur at the outset of a set of long and complex performances that will follow throughout the evening and next day.

The inaugural declaration of the centerpiece of the entire Yom Kippur liturgy accomplishes the following. Kol Nidre is the declaration and visualization of a compassion that the liturgical practitioners will now seek for themselves. This mindset continues in the selihot, which continue as further repetitive declarations of compassion throughout the solemn services.

It is not an easy task for worshippers to find this emotional outlet for themselves, along with their entire community, together on the same day at the same time in the same place. As the worshippers continue their extended visualizations of compassion, they ask God to help them attain this empathy and forgiveness. Their process extends into the viduy, the confessions of sin in which they list their shortcomings, forgive themselves and ask for forgiveness from their God.

The stoical legal declaration of Kol Nidre functions as a primary part of a warm liturgy. Worshippers say, "We release ourselves of our vows." Parishioners start with that form of proclamation because that is—in a scribal idiom—a way to say that they have compassion on themselves, they forgive themselves. Here in this collective house of gathering, they speak about themselves. They emotionally—not legally—visualize that they can annul their own wrong declarations, intentions and acts of the past and of the future.

These words in nonfigurative legal idiom are then pragmatically used as a personal meditation of compassion—as clear as any such act in any other religious context. This is a Jewish meditation. There is no clear abstraction to which the liturgical users appeal to formulate a definition of Jewish compassion. They inductively learn what it is from the modes in which they practice it. The people in the congregation begin this meditative analysis and perception to trigger the realization that its liturgy in this instance on Yom Kippur Eve is a long diverse set of meditative practices seeking for themselves and for their fellow Jews "*rahamim*," "*selihah*," "*mehilah*." The worshippers prepare to have

remorse, regret, and true pain because they are trapped by their shortcomings, their bad deeds, their inability to find peace. They have been disappointed, traumatized, and confused by what they see around them.

They seek compassion, which is commonly defined as, "sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others." In a process that they call "atonement" they turn this compassion inward to address their own case, to have mercy on their own souls. They perform this liturgy enmeshed in their cultural trappings, simple and ornate. The pragmatic metaphor of choice to start the engine of compassion is the conceptual legal process for the release of vows. The idiom of these most sacred prayers begins with that. Kol Nidre serves on a basic subconscious emotional level as the ordinal visualization and articulation of the Jewish meditation of compassion.

This begins the epic Jewish holiday of compassion. The worshippers employ a legal sounding idiom saying that they are releasing vows. With that visualization of Kol Nidre they are in fact starting a twenty five hour marathon of meditative compassion and forgiveness.

### Visualization Circuit Training

The daily morning prayers in many synagogues often last no more than thirty minutes. During the short prayer services, Jews cycle through diverse visualization exercises, as we have discussed above. With this final analogy I conclude my inquiry into the religious visualizations that I find in the major Jewish prayers. I compare the busy composite service with its rapid movements from one visualization to another to a session of circuit training exercises.

Physical circuit training in a gymnasium or other workout facility is a form of body conditioning or resistance training using high-intensity exercises for strength building and muscular endurance. In most circuit training, the time between exercises is short and the trainee moves on quickly to the next exercise. In a typical exercise circuit, one completes all the prescribed exercises in the program in a short span of time.

The inner spiritual circuit training of the prayers is a form of soul conditioning that uses high intensity exercises for visualization building and concentration endurance. In a prayer circuit, participants typically complete all the prescribed exercises in the program in a short duration. In most prayer circuit training the time between visualization events is brief. The performer moves on quickly to the next visualization event.

Jews who follow the recommended interior visualization regimens of Jewish prayer, which I have discussed above, may indeed, as Rabbi Sacks suggested, be engaged at a high level in prayer that is, "the most intimate gesture of the religious life, and the most transformative." I have proposed here that in the details of the prayers the visualizations, images, and gestures of the liturgy are complex, diverse, and deep in specific ways that define many important aspects of what it is to be a believing and practicing Jew.