Penina Weber Learning and Cognition

Dr. Krakowski Fall 2010

Final Paper:

Prayer: Cognitions and Contradictions

Prayer, or Tefillah, is a major component of Jewish observance, and in general a defining characteristic of Judaism- the possibility and power of communication and relationship between The Creator and His creations. Tefillah is indeed discussed in halachic/legal works within a structure of appropriate texts, times, and situations. But perhaps most essential to Jewish prayer is the philosophy behind it; tefillah is called “Avodah She’BaLev”, service of the heart. It is therefore intensely personal and unique to each individual. There are various types, methods, and media of prayer, which rightfully allow for individual intention and expression. One’s approach to tefillah often changes and develops as one gains life experience and proceeds on one’s spiritual journey. One’s perspective on tefillah, therefore, often reflects one’s larger perspective on Judaism in general, or one‘s relationship with G-d. Jewish schools train their students in the practice of prayer; some, though not all, also maintain a curriculum of explaining its language, evolution, and philosophy. Considering all these factors, we sought to understand how various individuals approach and conceptualize the text, goals, and overall experience of tefillah.

The results of our study found that the subjects often had very similar theories of the categories, goals, and origins of prayer. There was one overarching difference between the male and female perspectives. The experts often gave responses similar to the novices, albeit with a more mature understanding and articulate terminology. The novices expressed rather high levels of belief in the goodness of G-d even in the face of unanswered prayers, or perhaps just as a product of schooling; but the experts were able to respond more sincerely, acknowledging our ultimate ignorance compared to G-d, and ultimately the need to trust His decisions, and to pray even if we don’t understand if or how it “works”. We can identify that subjects used lists, schemas, cases, and mental models to guide their thinking of the structure, purpose, and relationship with G-d engendered by tefillah, rooted in their schooling or personal experiences and thoughts.

The two novices we interviewed are elementary-school-aged boys, and our two experts are teachers of tefillah, at the elementary and high-school, as well as university levels, one female and one male. We began with a task: we presented them with cards inscribed with names of various prayers, and asked them to organize them into categories. We asked them to think out-loud as they categorized the tefillot, to explain why they grouped them as they did. The types of categories prompted us to ask what they thought is the purpose of tefillah, the reason we pray so much and so frequently, and what they thought to be the origins of prayer and the prayer book, and their feelings about the use of an established text in an activity meant to be uniquely personal. We inquired if they feel that G-d listens to their tefillot, and how they feel when it seems their tefillot have not been answered; this also led to an exploration of greater theological principles of Divine knowledge and human effort. We asked them about the role of High Holiday prayers vis-à-vis our daily prayers, and asked if they ever communicate with G-d beyond the text of the siddur, in what we could call “informal prayer”. We concluded by asking if they felt the siddur was lacking any prayer, and if they could add one, what would it be?

Some questions yielded almost identical responses, and some posed a challenge for them all to answer. Sometimes our prompts led them to conclude in similar ways to other subjects, and sometimes even with prompting, even an expert did not mention a basic classification of tefillot that we expected he would. The two novices, both very bright students at the same school, often responded almost-identically, such as the Avot setting the precedent of three tefillot a day, likely pointing to curricular decisions to teach specific aspects of tefillah. The female expert usually responded in a way that she would respond to her own students’ questions, very comfortable with some classic pre-planned answers, but often had to think more deeply about questions which she had not fielded as a teacher, and was challenged to develop her own responses. The male expert, literally a renowned academic expert of Biblical text and Hebrew etymology, characteristically organized prayers according to their textual origins, traced prayers to their Talmudic beginnings and not to the Avot as the others had, and only with much prompting ventured into answers that were more philosophically-inclined.

While interviewing the novices, we sometimes prompted them or responded in a way that informed their answers more completely. Perhaps they did not know or could not articulate proper Hebrew terminology, such as the distinctions of, “Bakasha” and “Hoda’ah”, when saying, “Thanking Hashem” and “Asking Hashem for things”. We would teach them the proper terms, and clarified if that is indeed what they intended to say or not.

Three out of four traced tefillah to the three Avot/Patriarchs, and some also mentioned the korbanot/sacrifices in whose stead we pray at three designated times each day. One novice and both experts distinguished between tefillot that were consistent and routine, or only said at specific occasions. It is common for males to think in terms of technicalities and logistics; the male novices perhaps used their own thinking, or perhaps were taught by male teachers or by experience to see tefillot in that way, considering the male’s obligations to pray specific prayers at specific times of day, etc . It is interesting, therefore, that the female expert also initially characterized them as such, but she was able to quickly add to her response when prompted. The male expert went beyond and said that some are chovah/obligatory, while others are reshut/voluntary, as per circumstance.

Unlike the others, another way the male expert organized the tefillot was according to their origin: Biblical, Rabbinic, etc. He was consistent in his tendencies to draw upon the textual history and legal reasoning behind tefillah, unequivocally stating that the reason we pray is because it is a commandment. This was a cut-and-dry response, perhaps characteristic of a male academic. After prompting, he ultimately agreed that there certainly are emotional and spiritual benefits to prayer, but that was certainly not his initial reaction. This highlighted the greatest difference between male and female responses; the female expert’s initial response to the purpose of prayer was about the opportunity to develop a relationship with G-d. This is typically characteristic of the feminine desire to create connections and open channels of communication with others.

Interestingly, while the male expert is a skilled linguist, it was the female expert who added a grammatical note about tefillah: the word “l’hitpallel”/to pray is in the reflexive form, teaching us that prayer is meant to inspire us to be introspective, to develop self-awareness through the process of speaking with G-d. This psycho-emotional approach to prayer could lead us to think that humans would appreciate and seek-out this experience. However, the male expert said that we pray simply because it is a commandment, that we would not pray had we not been commanded to; he added that perhaps we would, but we would never have thought to devise a system of tefillah as we currently have without a Higher authority directing us to.

They had differing notions regarding the historical background of the siddur. Both novices, growing up in the same school, again expressed nearly identical answers, of the evolution of the siddur over time, starting with the Avot and others adding to it over time. The experts, both very educated in the field of Jewish History, highlighted specific eras in which the prayers were established; the male pointed to the codification of the blessings and times of prayer discussed in Talmud, and the female discussed the Ge’onim who adapted those blessings and prayers and further established them into a set order, hence, the prayer book is called “siddur”, or order. When asked how we have different versions of our prayer book, which originated from the same rabbinic leaders centuries ago, the male expert acknowledged that while various communities have adapted their siddurim differently, they all “aim at the same purpose”, i.e. to fulfill our commandment of prayer.

We asked about the subjects’ opinions on using the siddur/prayer book, an objective text for what is encouraged to be subjective and personal. The older novice said that his favorite tefillah is that of Shma Koleinu, because we have the leeway to insert our own personal requests and communicate anything we wish to G-d. The male expert believes that the siddur aids in facilitating our tefillah, for without it, we wouldn’t know what to say; “we’d be mute”. The female expert, however, is concerned that it has become more of a crutch that inhibits our ability to think and feel for ourselves in tefillah; we are preoccupied with the text and not effusive enough in our personal conversations with G-d, “like our grandmothers who couldn‘t even read Hebrew, but could daven all day”. She emphasized that true prayer, therefore, is not necessarily from within a siddur, but one that emanates from the heart. She is consistent in her cognitions as teaches her students the dictum that it’s better to verbalize fewer tefillot with more kavana/concentration, than to simply verbalize without any feeling at all, since that is counterproductive to the goals of tefilla, a personal relationship and connection with G-d.

In reference to how tefillah replaces the korbanot services, there is much textual basis for this, but it is perhaps not often elaborated upon. The female expert admitted to not quite knowing how tefllot are a fitting substitute for korbanot. Animal offerings in the Temple were governed by many specific laws and guidelines, usually performed by the kohen gadol, but sometimes with the participation of the one who brought a personal korban as well. This seems quite different from the personal, verbal recitation of prayers that we utilize to access G-d, just as animal offerings intended to, although nowadays it is a challenge for us to understand how. She offered that perhaps it was the experience of humbling before G-d, traveling with, preparing, and then sacrificing something valuable from your possessions. It is perhaps a reminder of priorities in life, an opportunity to visit the glorious Temple, the House of G-d, and to introspect into our spiritual standing.

All of the subjects hesitated, admitting to never have considered the question, “If Hashem decides everything for the year on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, why do we daven every day again for the same things?”. The older novice was consistent in his answers of prayers following different times; we have basic functions of prayer for requests and thanks, but add things in depending on the time of year, such as “V’Tein Tal U’Matar”. On the High Holidays we have special prayers for those days of the year, in addition to the general prayers we always say. The male expert offered that perhaps while prayer is always useful in some way, the High Holidays offer an opportunity at the time that is “most propitious” for prayers to be accepted favorably, noting that Ecclesiastes teaches about various times and opportunities for different behaviors. The female expert drew an analogy of an ATM machine; during the High Holidays, G-d loads the machine with everything we need, but we must actively go and press the right buttons to receive the bounty waiting for us in potential. Our daily prayers throughout the year are the keys and buttons to open the door to receive those blessings in actuality. This is consistent with both of their beliefs that G-d does indeed know what we need and want, but we must actively communicate with Him to benefit from it. This is not a burden or a chore; rather, the female expert teaches her students that this is a way that we build a relationship with G-d. We are created imperfect and vulnerable to realize that we need G-d to help us, to beseech Him for it, and to acknowledge His kindness. Even the older novice alluded to this very mature idea, that even though G-d knows what we need and want, “if we had everything we need than we wouldn’t ask Him for things”. The male expert said that G-d has all of our needs created and ready to be accessed, but our prayers affect our receiving them or not.

Another significant philosophical question about tefillah is the ability to pray for another. Jews very often do this, giving brachot, including others in our tefillot, and doing mitzvot as merits to help another in need. Logically, how does this work, if we all must access our own individual “ATM accounts” of blessing? The female expert explains that all of our tefillot are collected and joined together; we believe in the power of tefillah b’tzibbur, praying within a community, as our individual merits are connected to and therefore increased many-fold by the merits of the larger community. So, our tefillot end up benefiting everyone since we are all connected, but essentially they still benefit us as individuals, facilitating our uniquely personal connection with G-d. The male expert offered that we are essentially always praying for others; our tefillot are worded n the plural form, “Save US, Heal US, Bless US” etc. This reminds us of and engenders the significance of the unity of the Jewish community;” G-d prefers that”.

We can identify many functions characteristic of cognitive science in the responses of our subjects. When asked to perform the task of grouping various tefillot into categories, they often seemed to take on the form of lists, enumerating which tefillot belonged under a specific description, such as “every-day” or “occasional”. The female expert even listed the given tefillot in-order of when we say them each day.

The subjects definitely expressed themselves in ways that highlighted schemas about the nature of tefillah. Both novices held schemas that tefillah is solely for “asking Hashem for things” and “thanking Him”; they were thus able to categorize the various tefillot into “packets” of knowledge. They used a Bottom-Up/Data-Driven approach to organize the tefillot as they encountered them. The female expert, however, had a more mature view; beyond the purpose of thanking and asking, and praising, is to develop a communicative relationship with G-d, and to develop ourselves in the process. She used a Top-Down/Conceptually-Driven approach to explain her idea of the purposes of tefillah, approaching the whole topic as a theological and emotional encounter, which then laid the path for the details.

Our attitudes towards prayer in specific and spirituality in general are often informed by case-based reasoning. Besides for what one has been taught about tefillah, perhaps even more powerful a lesson are those moments or experiences when one has personally felt connected to G-d, or felt a revelation of sorts, or witnessed something happen to another. Whether a tragedy or a wondrous salvation, our notions of the efficacy of prayer are often influenced by the results of an event about which one prayed. Whether for insight on an exam, clarity in a relationship, a safe journey, a lucrative business venture, or a medical miracle, one’s faith in G-d and faith in prayer to G-d will likely be strengthened by seeing the results he hopes for, or weakened if the prayer seemed to have gone unanswered, or worse, rejected. In a pleasant surprise, our young novices expressed great faith in the goodness of G-d; even when their tefillot did not “produce” the “results” they hoped for, they ultimately knew it was meant-to-be and for their best. The female expert shared as an example the story of Nachshon Wachsman, an Israeli soldier captured by terrorists. His mother appeared on television beseeching Jews the world over to pray for her son’s safety and survival; she specifically requested that women light a Shabbat candle for her son, for their son. There was tremendous show of solidarity, love, and unity in the mass prayer vigils and mitzvah efforts around the world. Sadly, Nachshon was killed. As his parents mourned, one of their primary concerns was that all those who had prayed and performed mitzvot on behalf of Nachshon would not despair, not to think their words and tears were for naught, but rather to believe that G-d had indeed listened to their prayers, but that this time, the answer was, “No”. They were concerned that many Jews, many of whom had never prayed before, would develop a negative bias using case-based reasoning to compare and adapt to other situations in the future, that prayer is a futile effort.

When asked, “Does G-d know what we want/need? If yes, why do we have to pray for it?!”, both experts described a similar situation. I think this symbolizes a mental-model of the relationship between G-d and man, heaven and earth, Deity and follower, Giver and receiver. They both explained that G-d does know what we need, and it already exists in theory; however, since He wants to have a relationship with us, it is necessary for us to communicate with Him in order to actually receive that which we need, to benefit from that which we want. Elsewhere, however, we found among all the participants the purposes in prayer of both thanks and request; thanks is in response to what we already have, while request is asking for that which we do not yet have. These are both essential to the G-d-man relationship, in a perpetual cycle of give-thank-give more, or perhaps of thank-give-thank more. Perhaps then, we conjure up different images on different occasions, but consistently maintain a “conceptual flow chart” of the dual-directional interaction and experience of prayer.

Our various associations with prayer can be described as analog, which runs, changes, adapts, and develops according to our life experiences. It is likely that children conjure up mental models of their own, with little or no basis; since we cannot define or draw who or what G-d is nor how prayer “works”, we cannot prove a mental model to be incorrect. However, our sources guide us towards an understanding of what it means to speak with and listen to Someone whom we cannot see or hear, and it is only natural and expected that our notions become refined and matured as we learn and grow. The female expert acknowledged that different answers to questions about tefillah are suitable for students at different age levels; not everyone is intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually mature enough to accept or understand some aspects of tefillah. For example, if a student’s relative passes away from illness after praying intently for his recovery, the student must be pretty mature to accept an explanation that ultimately our tefillot do indeed go somewhere, affect something, help someone; we don’t know who or what or why, but we trust that G-d knows what He is doing and made the right decision.

Our experts and novices sometimes responded identically, sometimes similarly, and sometimes completely differently. The male novices thought mostly in terms of the designations of time, the female expert thought mostly in terms of human psycho-emotional and spiritual desires, and the male expert thought mostly in terms of parameters of law and religious practice, and historical and textual accuracy informing our practice. They all alluded to many of the classic notions of prayer as discussed in te corpus of Rabbinic literature. The female expert used those sources to support her position that tefillah must be intellectually honest and emotionally sincere, the male expert used them as bases for factual details of the reasoning and ritual of prayer, and the novices were competent in mentioning basic concepts of prayer they had learned in school, likely by the same teacher or by different teachers working within the same curriculum. All except the male expert demonstrated use of praise, request, and thanks as both a list of types and purposes of tefillah, and also as schemas within which other tefillot are encompassed. The female expert often offered analogies to illustrate her mental models of the relationship between man and G-d. The novices certainly represented subjective juvenile perspectives on these large philosophical issues, and the male expert was comfortable speaking not only as a subjective individual, but with the backing of decades of study of Jewish law, philosophy, and history; some responses were more personal, but some, as he admitted, were “pre-planned”, typical and expected questions that he has dealt with in the past. We were gratified when presenting him with questions that he needed to pause to ponder before answering.

Teaching tefillah is one of the greatest challenges in Jewish education today. We live in an age and culture in which religion is scarcely depicted as interesting, important, or inspiring, and our job as Jewish educators is to show that it is. We can assume a given premise that students believe in G-d, and from that point we can teach prayer and other mitzvoth. Alternatively, we must often “prove” G-d to skeptical students, not disbelieving from cynicism or to spite teachers, but because we simply cannot see, touch, or understand G-d in a simply physical way. We can teach students to pray what will be vacuous, insincere words while ignoring a larger crisis of faith, or we can take the time to discuss the dilemmas and work through the possibilities, and hopefully students will grow to develop their own understanding of and connection with The Eternal. If we make time in school for prayer and expect students to know the words and the practices, we owe it to them to be able to use those words effectively and actually feel as though they are speaking with G-d, and He is listening.

It is clear from our findings among subjects whose ages span, roughly, a fifty-year range, that some concepts of prayer have been taught similarly for decades. We distinguished between the approaches of the male and female expert as being academic/philosophical, and traditional/emotional. It is likely that these disparate approaches are present in any time and place, but perhaps they point to differences in Jewish education from the previous generation, in which Orthodoxy was learned as very technical, empirical, and academic, to this generation, in which Torah observance is emphasized by aspects of emotional health, spiritual fulfillment, and socially beneficial. Most educators today acknowledge that we need to make Judaism as pleasant, pleasurable, and exciting as possible if we are to ensure a bright Jewish future. While the textual and legal aspects are critical and essential, perhaps we need to continue to stress, at least to younger students, the more inspiring emotional experience of tefillah, something all people can relate to and create within themselves, as opposed to only the intellectual elite, or simply those more comfortable with the technical approach.

There is therefore a need for conceptual change about tefillah; perhaps boys especially feel pressured to wake up and be counted for a minyan, pray three times a day, even lead the services. I cannot speak for boys, but I can see how it can be very challenging to internalize the glorious beauty of prayer when it is time-consuming and perhaps sometimes an impingement on one’s activities. However, rabbis and teachers must endeavor to establish an atmosphere of tefillah which encourages asking questions about faith, minimizing words and pages if it means maximizing motivation, and not simply reprimanding or punishing for late arrival or disruptions during tefillah, but to create a culture in which the boys feel empowered by being counted in a minyan, feel privileged to don Tefillin, respect the sanctity of the Beit Knesset, and have a strong conscience guiding them to pray even when there is no school.

Women are said to maintain a special and strong relationship with tefillah; we have an innate desire for connection and communication, and a natural capacity to more-easily connect with the Divine, and therefore are not obligated the same way as men with the structure, frequency, and mode of tefillah. The torah and Talmud are replete with inspiring episodes of the sincerity and efficacy of women’s prayers. Girls, however, will not appreciate their special role and power unless they feel a strong connection with Hashem. The same way as with boys, girls must feel safe and validated to ask questions of faith, which ultimately are manifested in our tefillah and overall mitzvah observance.

Many children are very intimidated by Hebrew. Tefillah must therefore somehow be taught as intellectually stimulating and interesting, in ways other than simply translating the words We need to open the doors to tefillah for all children (and adults) in which they do not feel forced into something unknown and awkward, but encouraged to find their own voice, their own approach, and their own connection, with proper guidance from teachers. Tefillah, as traditional and communal as it is and must be, perhaps need also be considered in a curriculum of differentiated instruction.

We asked our subjects if they speak with G-d outside of the siddur, if they feel His Presence beyond the scope of the prayer book. The novices acknowledged asking G-d for help in their own little activities, and the female expert emphasized the importance of showing our students that G-d is always with us in our actions and experiences each day.

We used the example of brachot/the blessings we say on foods that we eat every day as an example of prayer beyond the book. Everyday brachot are an opportunity to acknowledge and communicate with G-d frequently, privately, briefly, and sincerely. Again, we may have to shift the focus of our teachings on not seeing this as a chore to remember to say before we eat, nor as an unfair delay in enjoying our food, but as a helpful reminder throughout the day that all we have is from G-d, and we must, and can directly thank Him. Or, training ourselves to recognize daily occurrences as Divinely ordained becomes a great automatic reminder of G-d’s constant loving Presence in our lives. Formal tefillah therefore can become much less intimidating, more approachable and invigorating, if we seek to appreciate our everyday opportunities for connection, and become people who are sensitive to spirituality.

Tefillah in school does not remain tefillah in school; it becomes tefillah in the synagogue and in the home. If a student feels no connection to G-d in a Jewish school, there is little hope he will feel it anywhere else either. We must be role models of sincerity in faith, consistency in practice, and sensitivity in interactions with students, to teach our students by example of what it means to pray. The Talmud says that the Gates of Prayer are never locked. We must teach tefillah as a means of expression, connection, and hope in all of life’s circumstances. Because tefillah represents so much of what Judaism represents, we must seriously examine how we impart that message to our students and children. All of the Jewish People are family, as our tefillot join together with the merit of the community. Let us be among those who pray and connect sincerely and effectively, and educate our students and children to do so as well. Because as someone once said, “Families that pray together, stay together”.