Can Atheists Pray?

(Shabbat Shuvah, 10/1/11)

Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat that falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, gets its name from the opening verse of the haftarah reading, Hosea 14:2,

> Return (*Shuvah*) O Israel to the LORD your God,
> for you have fallen because of your sin.

My starting point today is the subsequent verse,

> Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to Him:
> Completely take away guilt, take hold of good, and let us replace bulls with our lips.

This has often been cited as a source text for our replacing the animal sacrifice services described in the Torah with prayer services. However, the context provided by chapter 13 of Hosea suggests that these offerings of words were only to serve in lieu of the bulls that had been given to Ba'al, the calf god, instead of to the LORD our true God, and not as a replacement for future sacrifices.

The rabbis cited this text in an attempt to justify a change that had already occurred and that was a significant break from traditional practice. Jewish prayer apparently has its roots in the Babylonian exile, and in its essential elements it has more in common with Hindu meditation than with European prayer. The Babylonians forcibly relocated most of the population of Jerusalem, including the Judaean intelligentsia, to refugee camps in what is now southern Iraq. The Babylonian empire was then overrun by the Persians, a seminomadic people from the east, who quickly established a vast empire that stretched from the Mediterranean to northern India. The Jewish exiles found themselves at the center of a vibrant multicultural new civilization. It seems quite possible that they could have been exposed to Indian religious practices, and seeing as their traditional religious practice, of tightly controlled centralized animal sacrifice at the Temple of Jerusalem, was at that time not viable, they might have been open to considering alternatives.

The English word *pray* comes from the Latin *precārī*, which comes from an Indo-European root *perk*, meaning "ask" or "request." The Hebrew word for prayer is תפלה (*tefilah*). The verb "pray" is התפלל (*hitpalel).* The root of these words is פלל (*pilel*), which is rarely used in the the Hebrew Scriptures in this simple form, but in the few examples we have, its meaning seems to be "make a decision." *Hitpalel* is the reflexive form of the verb, which would mean "decide oneself." A more accurate translation than "pray" is "meditate." (*Meditate* comes from the Latin *meditare*, meaning "think about," but the word is commonly used in English for describing the Hindu practices of mental discipline directed toward having a beneficial effect on the practitioner.) *Tefilah* then can be translated as "self-decisioning" or "meditation." Perhaps this is why so many Western Jews have so much trouble "praying." We confuse what Jews do in a synagogue with the Christian practice of making personal requests for favors to a supernatural being.

My personal "prayer" journey did not begin on a positive note. I had been carefully protected from Jewish ritual practice by my parents. My mother would proudly declare that we were "culturally Jewish" but not "religiously Jewish." I generally accepted this without much thought. Nevertheless,

when I was in college, one Saturday morning I ventured over to the Hillel center in response to a flier announcing "Bible Study" with the rabbi. I had never read the Bible, so I figured this might be of intellectual interest. The rabbi, who described himself as "Reconformadox," led a lively and wide ranging discussion of the weekly Torah reading with a small group of dedicated students. What I did not realize was that this study session was in place of a morning prayer service, which he would have preferred, but he rarely could collect the nine other males he needed for a minyan.

One week a miracle occurred: We had a minyan. I was handed a Siddur and the rabbi enthusiastically launched into the Shacharit service. I read along in the translation and was appalled at what I saw. I was training to be a scientist, and here I was participating in a bizarre ritual in which we seemed to be trying to speak to some supernatural being up in the sky, bowing to Him and praising Him in exaggerated archaic figures of speech, thanking Him for all sorts of magical deeds. It seemed to confirm my mother's warnings to me about the superstitions my immigrant grandmother brought with her from the shtetl, which ought to be an embarrassment to any modern American Jew.

My discomfort, I now realize, was due to a confusion over the purpose of the ritual. What we do on Saturday morning in a synagogue has little in common with European prayer but much in common with Hindu mantra meditation. *Mantra* is a Sanskrit word meaning "thought." Mantra meditation is the use of words, either spoken out loud or said silently to oneself, to control or train one's thoughts. This nicely complements the Jewish concept of *mitzvah*, or proper behavior. Moses (and his successors) have told us how we should behave. Mantra meditation (self-decisioning) is a mind-training regimen to help ensure that we will do the right thing when tested. It enables us to take control of our incessant mental chattering to ourselves and directs it by substituting a predetermined text. This creates a desired set of attitudes and automatic responses. Even after the Temple was rebuilt, this new kind of Jewish religious practice continued, alongside the old. After the Temple was destroyed for the second time, it became the predominant form of Jewish ritual practice.

However, adaptations were needed to make the Hindu model appropriate for Jews. One change is that the mantra was to be recited standing, rather than sitting on the ground Hindu style. Presumably, this was because it had been traditional to stand during the Temple sacrifice service. A more fundamental problem was that Hindu mantra meditation is a very solitary activity. Cutting oneself off from the community is not very Jewish. How can solitary contemplation be made into a communal activity? Resolving paradoxes of this sort is something that Jewish civilization excels at. Our tradition is synthetic. We have often been at our most creative when we have taken insights from other civilizations and blended them with our own. Here is the solution the rabbis came up with: We will meditate in a group (a *minyan*). In other words, we will be solitary together. What's more, for an added sense of common purpose, we will all recite the same mantra.

This is brilliant in principle, but what mantra will we use? Hindu mantras can be customized for the individual. They are short phrases or even just a single word, repeated over and over. They can even consist of sounds with no meaning (*om*, for example). For us this is too laconic. We are a highly verbal people. Our mantra will have to say something!

But what will it say? Here is another paradox: We value coming together as a community, almost above all else, but when we do come together we can't seem to agree on anything. Here is the solution the rabbis came up with: Convene a committee and argue it out. The Talmud refers to this committee as the "Great Assembly." So what did they come up with? Of course they could not agree on a *single* mantra. They agreed to disagree, and compiled a collection of 18 mantras, but they agreed that everyone would say all of them. We call each of these mantras a *berachah*. This word is usually

translated into English as "blessing" but its literal meaning is "knee-bender." At a certain key point in each berachah a bend of the knees was made followed by a bow, which served as a kind of choreographic punctuation mark. Fortunately for those of us with weak knees, the rabbis later reduced this requirement to just two actual knee bends, in #1 and #17.

Each berachah is a statement of a different aspect of God, and a metaphorical statement of some basic concept of Judaism. Here are the key phrases and concepts of the first seven:

1. מלך עוזר ומושיע ומגן (king, helper, and rescuer, and shield)

Concept: Our lives can be insecure, but we should not let this paralyze us with fear. We place in our minds a mental image of God in charge of the universe, helping, rescuing, and protecting us as needed.

2. מלך ממית ומחיה ומצמיח ישועה (king of death and life, He causes salvation to sprout)

Concept: We die as individuals, but new life comes into being, and through this process *yeshu`ah* ("salvation," "good favor," "improvement of society") can flourish. In other words, we should be optimistic--things will get better, perhaps not for us individually but for our people and for the world.

3.האל הקדוש (the holy God)

Concept: God is something separate from us, not to be encroached on by the mundane. In other words, there are mysteries that are beyond our understanding.

4.חונן הדעת (graces us with knowledge)

Concept: The capacity for knowledge is what makes us human. We should be grateful for it.

5. הרוצה בתשובה (delights in repentance)

Concept: Don't give up just because you haven't always behaved properly. Next time you will have an opportunity to do better.

6. מוחל וסולח (pardons and forgives)

Concept: Don't feel worthless just because you haven't always behaved properly. Next time you will have an opportunity to do better.

7. גואל ישראל (redeemer of Israel)

Concept: A nation as old as ours will have its ups and downs. When things seem bad for us, don't despair. We'll survive.

And so on. Subsequent berachot concern (8) health, (9) sustenance, (10) national cohesion, (11) care for the needy, (12) support for the righteous,(13) rebuilding Jerusalem, and (14) national salvation. Berachah #15 affirms the power of tefilah, the process of reciting our mantra. Berachah #16 was

evidently proposed by one of the more mystically inclined rabbis. It focuses on the restoration of a feeling of closeness to God such as the Israelites experience in the legends in which a divine cloud descends from the sky and engulfs the altar. Then #17 simply says that we should bend the knees before God because it is fitting to do so--do it because this is what we do. This rabbi was perhaps a rationalist who was uncomfortable with the intellectually suspect emotionalism of #16. Finally, #18 really seems as if it could have been taken directly from Hinduism:

> 18. המברך את עמו ישראל בשלום (God bends His knees before His people Israel and bestows *shalom*)
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> Concept: By reciting our mantras, and thereby placing in our minds a mental image of a relationship with God as described in our legends, we develop a sense of *shalom*--inner peace, a feeling of completeness, a feeling that the universe is good.

Each knee-bender not only states the concept in question but precedes it with an explanatory sentence or paragraph. As a result, our full mantra runs six pages long! Of course it was not feasible to repeat it over and over in succession Hindu style. It was decided that it would be recited just three times per day, in the evening, in the morning, and in the afternoon. This is to be done six days per week. This new form of religious practice proved so successful that an edited version (called the *`amidah*, the "standing ritual") was composed later to be recited on Shabbat. Our prayer book, the Siddur, as we know it today, gradually developed over the centuries as the knee-benders were complemented with a wealth of additional poetry to help put one in the proper mood to recite the mantras and then still more poetry to wind down after the mantras.

A few years after I graduated from college I decided to give organized Judaism another chance. I happened upon a flier announcing an "Introduction to Judaism" course taught by Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold at Harvard Hillel. I signed up, expecting historical and philosophical study of texts from the Torah, the Prophets, or the Talmud. To my surprise, the text for the course was the Siddur, which we studied in detail. What I took away from the course was the idea that the Siddur is the core text of Judaism, and the purpose of the Siddur is to enable the quirky and distinctive form of mantra meditation that is the central ritual of Jewish civilization. When I first encountered this ritual I mistakenly assumed that its purpose was to have a conversation with a supernatural being, who might do us a favor as long as we ask politely. In fact, its purpose is to reign in and focus the conversations that we are constantly having with *ourselves*.

The Siddur text describes a mythical universe in which God will look after us, good behavior will be rewarded, and our lives have meaning. Entering temporarily into this universe through Siddur meditation has a beneficial effect on one's frame of mind, which lingers even after we return to the real world, where a supernatural God does not actually exist, where good behavior is not always rewarded, and where life does not have meaning other than the meanings we give to it. On Yom Kippur we are invited to a particularly prolonged and intense visit to this universe of God. May our meditations this Yom Kippur prepare us to respond appropriately to whatever circumstances our lives present us with in the coming year.

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