God of the Faithful, God of the Faithless: Belief and Doubt in Prayer

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach brings a passion for prayer to the JTS community. Through her work as founding director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, she develops and oversees programs and discussions, as well as prayer services on Shabbat and festivals, for the JTS community and the general public.

Rabbi Uhrbach loves being in the classroom at JTS, where she teaches courses on the meaning of liturgy, and a course she created titled “The Art of Leading Prayer.” She is tasked also with developing curriculum and resources for professionals and lay people seeking to revitalize their leadership and experience of prayer.

In addition to her role at JTS, Rabbi Uhrbach serves as the founding rabbi of the Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons in Bridgehampton, Long Island, enabling her to mentor many of JTS’s rabbinical and cantorial students in a congregational setting. She has played a key role in the acclaimed Lev Shalem prayer book series as associate editor of Siddur Lev Shalem, the Shabbat and festival siddur published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2016. She also served on the editorial committee for Machzor Lev Shalem.

A distinguished teacher of Torah, she is also a member of the Wexner Heritage faculty, and has taught and served as scholar-in-residence in many synagogues.

Rabbi Uhrbach was ordained at JTS, where she was a Wexner Graduate Fellow. A graduate of Harvard Law School (‘85) and Yale University (‘88), Rabbi Uhrbach served as Law Clerk to Federal District Judge Kimba M. Wood. She then joined the New York law firm of Satterlee Stephens Burke & Burke LLP, where she specialized in media litigation, becoming a partner of the firm in January 1996.

Visit www.jtsa.edu/community-learning to stay connected with JTS and find out about the wealth of programs and resources available online.
The Meaning of the Day
One day a year we make a journey in the company of the whole community of Israel—all of us together, each of us alone. That day is "The Day," the Day of Atonement, the day that is deathlike. It is the day we wear the kittel, the white gown that will one day be our shroud. It is the day when eating and drinking cease. It is a day when the world recedes and we are set free to uncover the true meaning of our lives.
—JONATHAN MAGONET (adapted)

Meditation for Putting on the Kittel
Just as I clothe myself in this white garment, so may You purify my soul and my body, as the prophet Isaiah said, "Even if your sins are like crimson, they will turn snow-white."
K’shem she-anı melabbeish/mitlabbeshet b’ovged lavan, kein talbin et nishmati v’gufati, ka-katur: im yihyu hata-eikhem ke-sharnim ka-sheleg yalpiru.

Br’akhah for Putting on the Tallit
Barukh atah Adonai, our God, ruler of time and space, who has made us holy through mitzvot and instructed us to wrap ourselves in tzitzit.
Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher kid’shenu b’mitzvotav v’tzivonu l’hitattef ba-tzitzit.

Entering Community
Prayer recited in community has a special dimension. Individuals may pray alone and keenly experience God. Judaism recognizes this and does not discourage solitary prayer. But Judaism is wary lest suchaloneness become the norm and the permanent condition of the human being. Religion is not simply what we do with ouraloneness, but what we do with others. Prayer should not isolate us, it should not lead us to believe that we need only God and ourselves, but prayer should lead us outward toward the love and care of the world we meet. Through prayer we discover how important the community is for sustaining our own salvation.
—REUVEN HAMMER (adapted)

God of the faithless and God of the faithful, with doubt, we come in loneliness, we wait silently, we pray expecting nothing, wanting everything.
God of the faithful and God of the faithless, You, who speak in whispered silence, You, whose reason is mystery— Your order is infinite; remember, we are finite and need words and reason.
—EDWARD FELD (after Miriam Kiony)

God of the faithless and God of the faithful, God in all forms and formless who was, and is, and will be, hear us and turn.

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Genesis 24:1-7

1 Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and Adonai blessed Abraham in all things. 2 And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, “Put your hand under my thigh 3 and I will make you swear by Adonai, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, 4 but you will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.” 5 And the servant said to him, “What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?” 6 Abraham answered him, “On no account must you take my son back there! 7 ‘On no account must you take my son back there!’ and ‘meditation’ means only prayer, as it says, ‘A prayer of the afflicted when he faints and pours out his meditation’ (Psalm 102:1). Yaakov instituted the evening prayer, as it says, ‘He lighted upon the place and spent the night there because the sun had set.’

Berakhot 26b

It has been stated: Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Hanina said: The tefillot were instituted by the Patriarchs. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: The tefillot were instituted to correspond to the daily sacrifices.

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Hanina . . . Abraham instituted the morning prayer, as it says, “Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood” (Gen. 19:27, i.e., post Sodom and Gomorrah), and “standing” means only prayer, as it says, “Then Pinhas stood up and prayed” (Psalm 106:30). Yitzhak instituted the afternoon prayer, as it says, “Yitzhak went out to meditate in the field toward evening” (Gen. 24:63), and ‘meditation’ means only prayer, as it says, “A prayer of the afflicted when he faints and pours out his meditation before Adonai” (Psalm 102:1). Yaakov instituted the evening prayer, as it says, “He lighted [va-yilga] upon the place” (Gen. 28:11), and pegi’ah means only prayer, as it says, “Therefore do not pray for this people, neither lift up evening prayer, as it says, “He lighted upon the place” (Psalm 102:1). Yaakov instituted the evening prayer, as it says, “He lighted upon the place and spent the night there because the sun had set.”

Tanhuma Chaye Sarah 5

Teach us our master: How many prayers should a person pray each day? Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said: Since the day consists of three different periods, therefore a person must pray three times each day. In the morning the sun is in the east, at noon the sun is in the middle of the sky, and in the evening it is in the west.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Avraham instituted the morning prayer, as it is stated, “Avraham awoke early in the morning.” Yitzhak instituted the afternoon prayer, as it is stated, “Yitzhak went out to meditate in the field toward evening.” Yaakov instituted the evening prayer, as it is stated, “He reached the place and spent the night there because the sun had set.”
Then Yitzhak entreated Adonai opposite his wife, for she was barren. Adonai was entreated by him, and Rivka has wife conceived. The children struggled within her and she said, "If so, why is there this 'I'?" So she went to inquire of Adonai.

doubts that has v'shalom there are two authorities, and she said, "If so, what is this Anokhi," that is to say, "that which is written in connection with the ten commandments, 'I am (Anokhi) Adonai your God, you shall not have other Gods,' which is contrary to what happened to me with this r'tzitza."

Bereshit Rabbah 63:6

Therefore, she began to have doubts that has v'shalom there are two authorities, and she said, "If so, what is this Anokhi," that is to say, "that which is written in connection with the ten commandments, 'I am (Anokhi) Adonai your God, you shall not have other Gods,' which is contrary to what happened to me with this r'tzitza."

Vilna Gaon on Gen. 25:22

And the Ibn HaYarhi wrote: I was asked about the matter of blessings, in that one speaks at the beginning as though God is directly in front of one, but at the end as though God is not in front of one (in Misrash Sohar Tov 16). The reason, according to all, is as follows. From the verse [Psalms 119:87] "I have placed Adonai before me always," [we learn] that when one mentions the Divine Name and says, "Barukh atah Adonai," God stands directly in front of one. And since we say afterwards, "melekh ha-olam", we find that God is not standing directly in front of one. Which is to say, Eloheinu, who is Sovereign of all space/time, is the one who sanctifies us with God’s commandments and commands us to do them.

Sefer Abudarham, Birkhot HaShahar, V'tzarikh

And the Riva wrote that the reason they established the blessing formula in the language of the second person and then the third person (nokheah v'nistar), is because the Holy Blessed One is both revealed and concealed -- revealed from the perspective of God’s deeds, and concealed from the perspective of God’s Divinity.

And the soul (neshamah) too is “visible” and hidden. Therefore a person (nefesh) blesses in the second and third person, as it says, “Bless Adonai, O my soul, and all of my innards [bless God’s] holy Name” (Psalms 103:1) and “Bless Adonai, O my soul. Adonai my God, You are very great . . . garbed in light as in a garment . . . At your rebuke [the waters] fled” (Psalms 104:1-2, 7). For blessing is made with the word of the mouth, and the thought of the heart; the heart is hidden, the voice is heard.

And a human being is a composite of body and soul. From the aspect of the soul it is fitting to cleave always to one’s Creator and to stand always in [God’s] presence, but this is impossible from the aspect of the body; therefore the blessing is in both the second and the third person. And this reason is more correct than the first one.
Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness.

Moses had said: God, great, mighty, and awesome (Deut. 10:17).

Then Jeremiah came and said: Aliens are destroying God’s Temple. Where then are [God’s] awesome deeds? Hence he omitted ‘awesome’ (Jer. 32:18).

Daniel came and said: Aliens are enslaving God’s sons. Where are [God’s] mighty deeds? Hence he omitted the word ‘mighty’ (Dan. 9:4).


But how could the Rabbis abolish something established by Moses? R. Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy Blessed One insists on truth, they would not ascribe false [things] to [God].
PSALM 90 contemplates human mortality and then arrives at a prayerful moment in which we ask that the accomplishments of our short lives have lasting value. Ultimately it is a prayer that the abyss between the human and the Divine be bridged. This is the only psalm ascribed to Moses.

LOD, לוד. Both here and in the last verse of this psalm, the Hebrew does not spell out the personal name of God (yod-hei-vav-hei) but instead uses the substitute word adonai, meaning “my lord” or “my master.”

REFUGE, רפוע. Just as in Psalm 104:22, where the same word is used to describe the lion’s hidden lair deep in the forest, the term suggests hiddenness and protection.

YOU SHAPED, תהמלים. The Hebrew verb describes the emptying of the mother’s womb in birthing; God’s act of creation is seen as the birthing of the world.

CHILDREN OF ADAM, אדם. The Hebrew phrase means “human beings.” The curse of Adam and Eve in their expulsion from the Garden was mortality. “And you shall return to the ground” (Genesis 3:19).

TURN TO US, ADONAI. This is the only time in the psalm where the personal name of God is used. Earlier, the poet reminded us that humans must “return” to the earth; now, the poet, addressing God with God’s personal name, calls upon God to turn to those who live on earth.

PEACE OF THE LORD, לשלום. Instead of God’s wrath, described at the beginning of the psalm, now we meet God’s beneficence. The word no-amed is associated with delight, beauty, grace, and peace. No-amed reverses the spelling ma-an, “refuge,” with which the psalm began.

MAY THE WORK OF OUR HANDS BE LASTING, עפר辨别ו. The final plea of the psalmist is that we might partner with God in creation—that our work, like God’s, may last and that our lives may thus have enduring meaning. We may not be immortal but we may be touched by a measure of eternity. Our experience of Shabbat may be such a moment.