Varieties of Religious Visualizations

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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.”

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.

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


[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