

THE COMPASSION OF THE AMIDAH IN SUBSTITUTING BLESSINGS FOR ANIMAL SACRIFICES TO GOD, THE ANCESTORS AND IN THE HOPE OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Amidah is the “standing prayer”. In historical terms the Amidah is the centre-piece of all the synagogue services, Liberal, Reform and Orthodox because it replaced the animal and other sacrifices that occurred at ancient holy altars like Shechem, in the desert Tabernacle, and in the Temples. Whereas the introductory psalms and hymns enable the worshipper to enter into a reverent mood, the Shma is a credo of faith in the one God. The Amidah, addresses God or as I would put it, ethical-Being rather than offering the living animal sacrifices that our ancient adoptive or symbolic or actual ancestors made. The animal sacrifices it replaced appeased God and the intermediary ancestors in ancient Israelite and other traditional tribal and imperial societies which rested on an originally tribal base. Thus the whole elaborate pantheon and the total mythology of the Greek gods belonged to all the city-states although tribal differences required local deities, much as in modern Catholicism countries like France, Spain and Italy will have in addition to the orthodox Trinity local shrines devoted to a particular appearance of the Virgin or a particular locally relevant saint.

This phenomenon in its priestly or local ritualised form is not open to philosophical writing and thinking. Karl Jaspers the existentialist philosopher refers to modern thinking which reiterates the “the axial age” of about 500 BCE and later when Greek, Israelite, Buddhist, Hindu and Chinese religions produced, evidently, a new educated class which could transform concrete ritual and institutionalised theology into metaphysics and ontology (*Origin and Goal of History*. London: Routledge, p.1). Ritual became potentially transcendental - treating the human being as subject to scientific law or at least ethical adjuration which could be argued for “a priori” (from before, or ontologically, as an aspect of eternal or infinite Being in a cosmic or material universe) rather than being “subject” to “God” or “the gods” who exerted mythical or magical power.

Does God or do the gods or ancestors require animal and human or even emotional and charitable sacrifice to appease them in their divine palaces or places in which they feel lonely, neglected and even hungry - in a truly conceptually divine realm? In tribal or local popular ritual yes. Hence the spirit of Diana, Princess of Wales, “appreciates” flowers left at a local, popularly constructed site which becomes a shrine. So in the modern person’s unconscious - also yes - a spiritual kinship projects a dead but living soul which in the sophisticated is only a precious memory. In a rabbinical or philosophical discourse or in modern prayer God and the ancestors are in a grey area between the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real as Lacan puts it. This frame of mind - local and in a sense “superstitious” religion - may be ecstatic or part of a cognitively cool ritual practice and thought-

system: the difference between Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian religion which partakes of different moods and measures of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic in Jacques Lacan.

Still, there is a big difference between appeasing and feeding the ancestors or even the gods as a kind of regressive concrete ancient gesture and appeasing and feeding God Him/Herself symbolically, imaginatively and really in a realm of abstract cognition and with ecstatic ("ecstasis Greek for "standing out") THOUGHT and emotional or aesthetic highly-charged ritual not mere gesture conditioned by tradition and fear of retribution. We are still partly ruled by the primitive unconscious, the realm of the ecstatically charged imaginary according to Lacan. Freud called the punitive conscience the Super-Ego, the harsh punishing projection of our hatred of the parents or teachers or policemen or politicians or important civil servants or soldiers or doctors or priests and ministers who have the power of life and death over us, either literally or the power to invalidate us as significant Others.

In the terrified bellowing of the animals who must have smelt the blood and heard the dying cries of their fellow creatures as thousands of worshippers with their prized and perhaps beloved cattle, goats, sheep and birds approached the Temple altar - surely God Himself would look favourably on the anguish of these, the pitiful, domesticated, trusting, slaughtered ones, and the imploring prayer of the human worshippers who were giving up so much to not just God but to YHVH, Adonai, the LORD of the universe, "Ribbono shel Olam". The supplicants must have been sometimes peasants not rich nobles or merchants, perhaps coerced by guilt induced by an unrelenting priesthood, Kohanim and Le'vi'im, yet worryingly divided as between priestly Sadducees and rabbinical Pharisees with different sectarian agendas during the later Greek and early Roman periods in Palestine. Out of the rabbinical Pharisees a proper philosophical discourse could emerge - even a Richard Rubinstein who "After Auschwitz" declared the death of God in a post-Holocaust theology and who initially advocated a pagan nature-religion respecting all living things.

From a humanitarian standpoint the abolition of animal sacrifices adds intensity and compassion to the modern Amidah. Not the Orthodox prayer-book (Singer "The Authorised Daily Prayer Book" Eyre and Spottiswoode 1962) but the liberal Siddur and the annotations to the liberal Chumash (edited by Plaut) suggest the Presence in the synagogue, rather than at the blood-stained ancient altar, Tabernacle or Temple of a male/female form of all-God - Elohim a plural - unified in YHVH whom the male and female ancestors address as male but in Liberal or at least Kabbalistic Judaism God is also seen, imaginatively, through the male and female ancestors in the female form of the Shekhina - the Presence. (Daniel Matt "The Essential Kabbalah" Harper, San Francisco 1996, p. i diagram). This should and does pervade the Amidah.

But this only applies when the Shekhina is the "sefirah" or emanation of God-or-ethical-Being-in-the-world as an all pervasive presence. However, admirably, this has entered Orthodox Judaism where in the evening Shabbat service obeisance is made to the Sabbath bride with the singing of the hymn "L'cha dodi". The Shekhina is also known in Kabbalism as Malkut or Kingdom, the hallowed ground or earth, the kingdom of God. Better that the earth or the guttering of the Temple altar should not run with hundreds, thousands, perhaps in all millions of gallons of blood. And the smell of the roasting flesh of previously beloved creatures. What sort of God would want that? The Ne'vi'im, the prophets quote a different God who is said to hate the empty sacrifices, ceremonies, rituals of

hypocrites who betray the commandments, ignore mitzvot and tzedakah. The prophetic God respects the broken-hearted who come to Him and Her in the spirit of teshuvah, repentance.

This humanisation of worship away from primitive blood-letting and the strong feminisation of God has come about with the advent of the modern and post-modern women's movement although, it was present in Kabbalism in medieval Spain in the elaboration of the myth of the male-female God based on the idea that "male and female made them" in Bereshit (1:27), the first human creation myth where the "image" of God is sexually egalitarian although binary. The Elohist is the author of this the first creation myth who writes in the name of "Elohim" rather than "the Lord God, or "the Lord" written as YHVH. The latter is thought in the Wellhausen or Documentary Hypothesis to have been written by the "Jahvist" who has another source for human creation - the myth of Chavva as created secondarily out of Adam's rib or side (Gen. 2:21). In Shabbat meditation the meditator might follow Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's "Jewish Meditation" exercises by talking to God, or inscribing God using the images generated on the closed eyelids to form the words of the Amidah. Since Elohim and YHVH have no substantial form the visual image of the name of God or the Lord God "inscribed" on the closed eyelids and slow, deep, yoga-breathing, can bring us close to ethical-being-in-the-world, rather than relying on a visual image of persons which is discouraged by the commandment against idolatry. Instead of bellowing dying and then roasted animals, visualising the words of the bracha is enough.

The Orthodox version of the Amidah, then, is patriarchal (Singer's siddur p 155) whereas the Liberal version throughout the prayer-book addresses the female as well as the male ancestors (Siddur Lev Chadash p. 97). The first bracha of the Amidah in the Liberal version translation addresses God as "you" (S.L.C. p. 97) whereas in the English translation of the Singer siddur God is referred to as "thou". In Singer's siddur God "bestows loving-kindness" in the abstract (Singer 1961 p 155) where in S.L.C. "You deal kindly with us all" which is specifically inclusive of non-Jews. But the first blessing in the Singer siddur also refers to a "redeemer" (that is a Messiah) whereas S.L.C. (p.97) in translation refers to "redemption" as an abstract state of ethical Being - usually implying that we are redeemed from sin by the ability to act redemptively towards others against whom we have sinned by our acts of reparation irrespective of a Messiah. Thus in Liberal Judaism we are in a pre-messianic age of constantly redemptive possibilities.

In the first blessing the Hebrew "Koneh ha'Kol" is not translated in S.L.C. but it is in the Singer siddur as the God who "possessest all things". The Orthodox idea is reflected in Jewish mysticism in which Being as such is without end (Ayn Sof) - and possesses all things - and is expressed in Adam Kadmon and Chavva Kadmona - primordial mythical human being containing God-like possibilities such as will (KETHER or sovereignty), HOKHMA (wisdom), DA'AT (knowledge), BINAH (understanding) and so on.

The second blessing in the S.L.C. refers to "Shield of Abraham and Protector of Sarah" - "magen Avraham v'ezrat Sarah" whereas in Singer Sarah is not mentioned either in the Hebrew or the English (Singer p. 155). Obviously the patriarchal nature of Israelite society and its expression in Orthodox Judaism is a serious issue here. The old-fashioned idea that women need protection but men need a shield as in battle is obviously institutionalised either in human society as such or in a pre-feminist form of Judaism. Of course men looking after children, the old, the sick and the handicapped need protection too and women, already used as front-line soldiers, need a shield.

The third blessing in the S.L.C. “Baruch atah Adonai machanay ha’maytim” is translated as :”source of eternal life” (p98) whereas in Singer the translation reads “thou revivest the dead” (p.155). So instead of a literal resurrection brought about by the coming of a messiah, what is understood is that either human or cosmological history is seen as eternal. In this way the idea of the multiverse as eternal connects with Hawking’s and other cosmologists’ understanding that there may be other universes so far away that their light will never reach us or even when our universe stops expanding it may contract back into a singularity only to explode again (Stephen Hawking “The Universe in a Nutshell” Bantam Press 2001, p. 86). This leaves open the issue of why Being should entail the end of our solar-system in approximately 5 billion years time when, by the laws of physics which are part of Being-beyond- human-ethics, everything on earth in the form of human history will be burnt to nothing when the sun will become a red giant and then a blue dwarf and then possibly a black hole. Being will remain but how will creative human evolution be understood from the ontological standpoint of Being? In other words, ontology-without-ethics addresses a cosmological question that has arisen in a age of astrophysics which no form of Judaism other than perhaps Kabbalah has the concepts with which to address the end of our space-time, if not space-time itself i.e. $E=mc^2$ - energy equals mass multiplied by the speed of light (squared).

However space-travel to another solar-system beyond our own which can support life may be understood as part of Being-as-human-ethics which still allows life beyond the death of the earth, the planets and the sun. The rabbis warned against enquiry into the beginning of things and the end of things. But our own death is at least something included in “source of eternal life”. When we die we should affirm “Adonai, melech, Adonai malach, Adonai yimloch l’olam v’ed’ in the immediate and foreseeable future which is subsumed by a possible resumption of Judaism on another planet. And this should be borne in mind when reciting the third blessing of the Amidah.

Thus the Amidah in NOT mentioning the earliest creation myths assumes that in one or other Torah reading we will confront our BINAH or UNDERSTANDING of what was a shield for Abraham and a protection for Sarah. An anthropological understanding of what Torah calls Chavva’s and Adam’s “disobedience” in the form of “knowing good and evil” comes in the form of ostensible “evil” - disobedience - which turns out, in “liberal” terms to be WISDOM (HOKHMAH) through which it is possible to see that Being either in-the-world or Being as such ontologically out of the world involves not evil but good. These primordial myths pervade solemn and sacred prayers like the Amidah.

How can the end of the world be good? Knowledge that life is limited and precious now, is surely good, although probably not eternal. And yet: Yuval Noah Harari in “Homo Deus” (Harvill Secker, London 2016) suggests to me that still identifiably human Androids who use mind/brain/AI/algorithms (alongside human wisdom) may survive some cosmic or terrestrial catastrophe, become like gods, and live forever perhaps somewhere else in the universe when the earth becomes, tragically, uninhabitable. We need to make a leap of faith crossing over the abyss of unbelief into which Abraham could have fallen at the Akedah. We need the Amidah and the ancestors including our spiritual heritage in Kabbalistic and Greek philosophers and modern contemporary scientists who implement new technologies to humanise Homo Deus and spiritualise homo sapiens with more than “elohim” - material gods. We need the eternal Mind of YHVH which Maimonides and Spinoza subsumed as the All, Kabbalistically the AYN SOF, the Without End, cosmic Being. This is the endless life mentioned in the blessings of the Amidah.