



Why Praise God in Prayer?

R. Elie Kaunfer – kaunfer@hadar.org

Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei 5783

Our prayers are filled with praises of God. What is the point of these praises, and how are we meant to understand them?

In Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei, we read of the journeys of the children of Israel through the desert. Many of the places listed are not previously mentioned in the Torah, and are shrouded in mystery. One such place is called “מקהלות - Mak'helot” (Numbers 33:25-26). What is the significance of this otherwise unknown location?

The Maharam Mi-Rotenberg (1220-1293) notes that this word only appears two other times in the Bible, both with the meaning of: a group of people gathered (from the root קהל) to praise God (see Psalms 26:12¹ and 68:27²). The Maharam Mi-Rotenberg thus concludes that this place was marked by the praising of God in a joyous spirit.³

Indeed, similar language of thousands praising God in a group marks a high point in the Shabbat morning liturgy:

¹ Here the word is מקהלים, but has a similar meaning.

² Interestingly, Midrash Tehillim 68:14, ed. Buber, p. 160b, identifies this assembly with children.

³ Maharam of Rotenberg to Numbers 33:25, printed in *Torat Hayyim: Bemidbar* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1991), p. 290.



Nishmat Kol Hai⁴

And in the assemblies (מקהלות) of tens of thousands of Your people
Israel, through joyous singing may Your name be glorified...

תפילת נשמת כל חי

ובמקהלות רבבות עמך בית
ישראל ברינה יתפאר שמך

This line of prayer follows specific groups who are meant to praise God (the upright, righteous, pious, and holy ones). But ultimately all of Israel, and indeed all of the world (כל היצורים) are meant to offer these praises of God.⁵

What is the point of these praises? Does God really need to hear our praise? And why so many words of praise in our prayers, repeated over and over?

It is clear that God does not need praise for God's own sake. After all, human praise can never fully describe God's attributes. This point is made clear in Nehemiah, when the leaders of the Levites exhort Israel to bless God's name. The verse states:

Nehemiah 9:5⁶

They blessed Your holy name, even though it is above all
blessing and praise.

נחמיה ט:ה

וַיְבָרְכוּ שֵׁם כְבוֹדְךָ וּמְרוֹמֶם עַל-כָּל-בְּרָכָה
וַתְהַלֵּלָהּ

⁴ Meir Bar-Ilan, p. 85, notes that some traditions included this prayer on weekdays, not just Shabbat. For more on this prayer, including its various stages of historical composition, see Meir Bar-Ilan, *Sitrei Tefillah Ve-Heikhalot* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan, 1987), pp. 84-108.

⁵ Ezra Fleischer theorized that many of the liturgical poems composed in Israel in the 6th-8th centuries were meant to be sung not only by a leader, but also by a choir (מקהלה), schooled in the structure and melody of these prayers. Fleischer admits this theory lacks direct evidence, although he attempts to prove it from the language and structure of these poems. See, for instance, Ezra Fleischer, *Pizmonei Ha-Anonymous* (Jerusalem: National Academy of Israel Sciences, 1974), pp. 16-19; Fleischer, *Shirat Ha-Kodesh Ha-Ivrit Bimeit Ha-Beinayim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), pp. 290ff.

⁶ This caveat is offered, drawing on this language from Nehemiah, in the Kaddish: "May God's name be blessed and praised... even though God is above all blessing, song and praise..."



The people praise God, but no praise can fully capture God's greatness. As Rashi comments on this verse: "God is higher and loftier than what the mouth is able to express."

Indeed, in some ideal form of prayer, we might not even offer any words of praise; our prayer to God might simply be silence. Imagine an approach to prayer that acknowledges the deficiency of human language in addressing God, and instead opts to have people express their adoration by saying nothing at all. This position is considered by one sage in the Yerushalmi:

Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:1; 12d⁷

R. Abun said: "Who can say the mighty deeds of God?" (Psalm 106:2). Ya'akov of Kfar Naboraya translated in Tyre, "To You silence is praise, God in Zion"⁸ (65:2)—the ultimate praise is silence. It is like a pearl that is priceless. All who praise it diminish it.

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות ט:א דף יב טור ד

אמר רבי אבון: "מי ימלל גבורות ה'" (תהלים קו:ב) תרגם יעקב כפר נבורי'א בצור: "לך דומיה תהלה אלקים בציון" (שם סה:ב) - סמא דכולא משתוקא למרגלית דלית לה טימי כל שמשבח בה פגמה.

God is like a pearl that cannot be described in human language; any attempt to do so might fool you into thinking you have captured its essence. In fact, in attempting to extol God, you have diminished God.⁹

And yet we do not follow this path of silence in prayer. Even though our praise of God necessarily fails to describe God accurately, our tradition emphasizes the importance of praise in worship. Why might that be so?

⁷ See also Bavli Megillah 18a; Midrash Tehillim 19:2, ed. Buber, p. 82b. Interestingly, Ya'akov of Kfar Naboraya is suspected in numerous rabbinic texts of heresy. See Kohelet Rabbah 7:26, ed. Kipperwasser, p. 122 and his further notes on p. 125.

⁸ This phrase may also be translated: "To You praise is fitting, God in Zion." Compare New JPS translation. But see Robert Alter on this verse who prefers the translation favored by Ya'akov of Kfar Naboraya.

⁹ See Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, Section 1, chap. 59, trans. Pines, vol. 1, pp. 140-141.



First, praise offers us the opportunity to decenter ourselves and place God at the center. Humans so often focus on their own power, abilities, and control. But we need to remind ourselves that all of this is an illusion. R. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that praise was the most important type of prayer for this reason: “In Jewish liturgy praise rather than petition ranks foremost. It is the more profound form for it involves... the sense of God’s majesty and glory.... The essence of prayer lies in man’s self-transcending.”¹⁰

My colleague R. Shai Held explains this approach in Heschel: “[T]he discipline of prayer...represents an attempt to overcome egocentrism... [T]he very project of prayer [is] to transcend the self and focus on what is greater than it...”¹¹

Held continues:

“For Heschel, prayer is the religious practice *par excellence* precisely because it is the activity in which human beings work directly to transcend and decenter themselves, transforming our consciousness so that concern for God lies at its very center.”¹²

The practice of reciting words of praise over and over again to God helps us move away from our own sense of ego. This may also explain the repetitive and effusive nature of the praising of God in prayer: transcending one’s self does not take place in an instant. It is a practice that requires much time and repetition, and is aided by the effusive praise of God (cutting against our instinct to—explicitly or implicitly—praise ourselves).

¹⁰ Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God* (Santa Fe: Aurora Press, 1998), pp. 63-64 and p. 15. Contrast the approach of R. Joseph Soloveitchik, summarized by Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 300-301, n. 96.

¹¹ Held, pp. 201, 204.

¹² Held, p. 217.



There is a second value to praise in prayer that I am drawn to, related to the sounds—not the meaning—of these words. As we have established, the project of praising God cannot be to describe God (this is a fool’s errand¹³); it must have another goal. For me, the experience of saying these words, with their repeated and rhythmic nature, can help draw me closer to God.

In other words, perhaps the purpose of the praise words isn’t to express an idea or a claim, but to enter into a journey driven by the sounds of the words.¹⁴ In this view, the words of praise aren’t irritating in their abundance, but rather understood as creating an experience of sound (and sometimes song) that transports. As Catherine Madsen writes: “Liturgy is not the medium of the ‘quick scan,’ but of the stammer, the repetition, the child’s phrase practiced over and over... The ambling movement of discovery not driven by a goal—spiritual indirection, one might call it—is the only route to the intense moments of focus in which intention, repetition and revelation converge.”¹⁵

Take the praise words of the Kaddish:

Blessed and praised,	יְתַבָּרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח,
and glorified, and exalted and uplifted	וְיִתְפָּאֵר וְיִתְרוֹמָם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא
and honored and elevated and extolled	וְיִתְהַדָּר וְיִתְעַלָּה וְיִתְהַלָּל
be the Name of the Holy Blessed One	שְׁמֵהּ דְּקַדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא

In the English translation, this seems like a mind-numbing list of synonyms for the basic idea that God is glorified. But the Aramaic terms have a meter and a rhythm, and when I recite

¹³ See R. Hanina’s critique of the attempt to praise God by adding more adjectives to the Amidah recorded in Bavli Megillah 25a and parallels.

¹⁴ Held, p. 53, summarizes Heschel as claiming: “religious awareness takes place at a level that is prior to our usual, verbal-conceptual mode of thinking.”

¹⁵ Catherine Madsen, *The Bones Reassemble: Reconstituting Liturgical Speech* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2005), pp. 28, 49-50.



them, I find myself transported in a journey that transcends specific meaning, and brings me closer to God.

R. Lawrence Hoffman described this aspect to praise:

“Words in prayer were not always intended to convey information about reality. The very reverse was often the goal. The mind was to be freed from the normal structures of thought, so that, in the extreme instance, a trance might set in.”¹⁶

This trance is not a journey back to the ego, but rather another way of transcending the self, and drawing closer to God.

One of the purposes of prayer is to decenter ourselves and draw closer to God. One of the ways that occurs is through the repetitive recitation of God’s glory. Even though we can never fully understand these aspects, and they do not indeed describe God, they diminish our tendency to place ourselves at the center. In addition, our recitation of repeated praise is an opportunity to transcend the regular sense-meaning of the words, and connect to the sound and rhythm of the recitation. This may allow us to enter a journey, fueled by praise words, to draw closer to God.

¹⁶ Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 155.

