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# The Experience of Jewish Liturgy

Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer

*Edited by*

Debra Reed Blank



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Schmelzer, Menahem



## IYYUN T'FILLAH

Dalia Marx\*

Knowledge is much more than mere knowledge of facts and much more than their integration and more than a system. Knowledge should penetrate in disguise; knowledge should exceed the rational; knowledge should penetrate the knowledge. And it is untouchable if one doesn't have some kind of total involvement, total involvement of the soul.

—Ariel Hirschfeld

The term *iyyun t'fillah* refers nowadays mostly to the study of prayer or to contemplation of its contents and ideas. This notion follows the use of the term in medieval Jewish literature.<sup>1</sup> However, careful examination of the occurrences of *iyyun t'fillah* in classical rabbinic literature testifies to the complexity of the term. It may provide a new understanding not only of *iyyun t'fillah*, but of ways in which prayer was perceived and conceived by the amora'im.

### *Iyyun t'fillah in Classical Rabbinic Literature*

The sole five occurrences of the term *iyyun t'fillah* in classical rabbinic literature appear in the Babylonian Talmud (although in some cases, Palestinian rabbis are quoted):

1. אמר רב יהודה בר שילא אמר רבי אסי אמר רבי יוחנן: ששה דברים אדם אוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה, והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא. ואלו הן: הכנסת אורחין, וביקור חולים, ועיון תפלה, והשכמת בית המדרש, והמגדל בניו לתלמוד תורה, והדן את חברו לכף זכות (בבלי שבת כז, ע"א).

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\* It is a great pleasure and honor for me to dedicate this article to Professor Menahem Schmelzer. I did not have the privilege of being a student of Prof. Schmelzer—only of his writings in the field of Jewish liturgy—and I am proud to participate in this tribute to him. I thank Dr. Debra Blank, Rabbi Diana Villa, and Ms. Zofia Nowak for their helpful notes. The epigraph appeared in “Tarbut v’-sifrut,” *Ha’aretz*, January 5, 2007.

<sup>1</sup> For example Rashi’s explanation of the term *halakhah p’sukhah*: “[Halachah] that doesn’t require *iyyun* (mediation, consideration, etc.), so one may not ponder it during one’s prayer” (*Ber.* 31b).

R. Yehudah b. Shila said in R. Assi's name in R. Yoḥanan's name: There are six things the fruit of which one eats in this world, while the principal remains for him for the world to come, namely: hospitality, visiting the sick, *iyyun t'fillah*,<sup>2</sup> early attendance at the Beth ha-Midrash, rearing one's sons to the study of the Torah, and judging one's neighbor in the scale of merit. (*b. Shabb. 127a*)<sup>3</sup>

2. אמר רב נחמן: תיתי לי דקיימית שלש סעודות בשבת. אמר רב יהודה: תיתי לי דקיימית עיון תפלה. אמר רב הונא בריה דרב יהושע: תיתי לי דלא סגינא ארבע אמות בגילוי הראש. (בבלי שבת קיח, ע"ב).

R. Naḥman said: May I be rewarded for observing three meals on the Sabbath. Rav Judah said: May I be rewarded for observing *iyyun t'fillah*. R. Huna son of R. Yehoshua said: May I be rewarded for never walking four cubits bareheaded. (*b. Shabb. 118b*)

3. ואמר רבי יצחק: שלשה דברים מזכירין עונותיו של אדם, אלו הן: קיר נטוי, ועיון תפלה, ומוסר דין על חבירו (בבלי ראש השנה טז, ע"ב).

R. Yitzḥak further said: Three things call a person's iniquities to mind, namely: a wall that threatens to fall, *iyyun t'fillah*, and calling for judgment on one's neighbor. (*b. Rosh Hash. 16b*)

4. ואמר רב יהודה: שלשה דברים [המאריך בהן] מאריכין ימיו ושנותיו של אדם: המאריך בתפלתו, והמאריך על שלחנו, והמאריך בבית הכסא. "והמאריך בתפלתו", מעליותא היא? והאמר רבי חייה בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן: כל המאריך בתפלתו ומעיין בה סוף בא לידי כאב לב שנאמר: 'תוחלת ממשכה מחלה לב' (משלי יג). ואמר רבי יצחק: שלשה דברים מזכירים עונותיו של אדם, ואלו הן: קיר נטוי, ועיון תפלה, ומוסר דין על חבירו לשמים!—הא לא קשיא, הא—דמעין בה, הא—דלא מעיין בה (בבלי ברכות נד, ע"ב—נה, ע"א)

Rav Yehudah said further: Lengthening three things prolongs one's days and years: prayer, a meal, and [easing in] a privy. But is the lengthening out of prayer a merit? Has not R. Ḥiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Yoḥanan: If one draws out his prayer and *m'ayyen* in it, he will in the end suffer vexation of heart, as it says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Prov 13:12). And R. Yitzḥak said: Three things cause a man's sins to be remembered, namely: [passing under] a wall that threatens to fall, *iyyun t'fillah*, and calling for judgment on one's neighbor. There is no

<sup>2</sup> I am not translating the term *iyyun t'fillah* at this point, since any translation is also an interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> The translations are based on the English text of the *Soncino Talmud*, ed. Isidor Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935–1952), with some changes. See similar traditions in *Midrash Mishlei* 27:18; *Yalkut Shim'oni*, *Va-yere* 82, *K'doshim* 611. This list is based on the shorter one of *m. Pe'ah* 1:1, discussed below.

contradiction: one [statement] speaks of a man who *m'ayyen* in it [his prayer], the other of one who does not *m'ayyen* in it. (*b. Ber.* 54b–55a)

5. אמר רב עמרם אמר רב: שלש עבירות אין אדם ניצול מהן בכל יום: הרהור עבירה, ועיון תפלה, ולשון הרע (בבלי בבא בתרא קסד, ע"ב).

R. Amram said in the name of Rav: [There are] three transgressions which no one escapes<sup>4</sup> for a single day: sinful thought, *iyyun t'fillah*, and slander. (*b. B. Bat.* 164b)

The quoted sayings reflect different understandings of the term *iyyun t'fillah*, or at least different attitudes toward it on the part of those who use it. Among them, the statement of R. Yoḥanan (no. 1) is especially present in the common religious awareness, since it became part of liturgical practice, recited every morning in the context of the symbolic study passages in the morning blessings. Perhaps this explains why *iyyun t'fillah* was generally viewed as a positive term throughout the generations.<sup>5</sup>

A positive attitude is found also in the dictum of Rav Yehudah, who claimed that one merits reward for practicing *iyyun t'fillah* (no. 2). In a later midrash we find a similar saying: “Three things bring a person to wealth: *iyyun t'fillah*, honest dealings (*masa u-matan*), and being humble (*alw*) in one’s relationship to the people of one’s home.”<sup>6</sup>

This should not surprise us, since the rabbis placed high value on prayer; thus, one might assume that the act of *iyyun* in prayer would be regarded as positive. Therefore, negative connotations of *iyyun t'fillah*, as in the instance of R. Yitzḥak who counts it among three things that “call a person’s iniquities to mind” (no. 3), are surprising. It is easy to understand why a “wall that threatens to fall” and a person who is “calling for judgment on his neighbor” may cause one’s sins to be remembered: a person who passes next to an insecure wall relies on his merits in order not to be injured,<sup>7</sup> and a person who reports the

<sup>4</sup> In the medieval midrash *Pirkei Rabenu ha-kadosh* the text reads *nimna* (avoids); Elazar Greenhut, *Sefer ha-likutim*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem 1966), 33.

<sup>5</sup> The talmudic discussion addresses *m. Pe'ah* 1:1, which is similar to R. Yoḥanan’s list but lacks the phrase “and visiting the sick and *iyyun t'fillah*.” The Talmud then asks which list is authoritative; however, the discussion does not appear in all the manuscripts of the Talmud (i.e., Ms. Vatican, Bibliotheca Apostolica, Ebr. 108).

<sup>6</sup> *Hupat Eliyahu*, ed. Yehuda David Eisenstein, *Otzar ha-midrashim* (New York: Reznik Menschel, and Co., 1915), 167.

<sup>7</sup> See Rashi; see also the recorded disapproval of rabbis toward people who counted on their merits and stood next to shaky walls without fear of being harmed by them (*b. Ta'an.* 20b–21a).

wrongdoing of his fellow will prompt the listener to question: “Has he enough merits that his neighbor may be punished because of him?” (Rashi, *B. Bat.* 164b). Doing it may recall the wrongs of the informers as well (as it is said in *b. Sukk.* 66b, “Woe to the wicked one, woe to his neighbor”). But in what way may *yyun t’fillah* call to mind one’s sins?

The saying of R. Yitzhak is quoted in the passage that includes R. Yehuda’s list of things whose “lengthening...prolongs one’s days and years” (no. 4), among which is the one who “prolongs his prayer.” The Talmud questions the validity of that claim, providing another saying by R. Yoḥanan: “If one draws out his prayer and *m’ayyen* in it, he will in the end suffer vexation of heart.” Note that R. Yoḥanan also counted *yyun t’fillah* among the six practices of which one enjoys the fruits in this world, “while the principal remains for him for the world to come” (no. 1). The Talmud solves the difficulty by declaring that longevity is promised to the one who prolongs his prayer, but not to the one who *m’ayyen* in it. However there is no explanation of the nature of *yyun t’fillah*, nor is it specified why it is mentioned there and which “vexation of the heart” one will suffer.<sup>8</sup>

Even more severe is the dictum of Rav quoted by R. Amram (no. 5). We can accept that *yyun t’fillah* may cause discomfort, as claimed by R. Yoḥanan, but how can we comprehend this action as one of the three transgressions from which “no one escapes for a single day”? These are not “actions” in the common sense of the word, since all have to do with speech or thought (*hirhur*).<sup>9</sup> These three actions are related to daily life and it has been suggested that they have to do with a person relying on his merits, if we borrow Rashi’s term when he referred to a wall that threatens to fall. *Hirhur averah* (a sinful thought) might lead a person to sin; so too *l’shon ha-ra* (slander),<sup>10</sup> at least according

<sup>8</sup> Similar things were repeated in the late midrash *Marganita d’-bei Rav*: “Who merits the world to come? The one that avoids transgressions, [evil] thought, slander, and anything hideous or that seems [hideous]; and [who] observes the commandments, holds [the meaning of “holds” is not clear] a commandment for its truth, shies away from sin and from *yyun t’fillah*, and confesses his sins to the Blessed One and repents.” Adolf Jellinek, *Beit Midrash*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrmann, 1966), 121.

<sup>9</sup> The application of Austin’s term “performative speech” may help us understand the nature of these transgressions. See J. A. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). I will not be able to discuss *yyun t’fillah* in light of Austin’s speech act theory in this paper, but it seems that such examination would be fruitful and could enrich our understanding with new insights.

<sup>10</sup> The Talmud is reluctant to call it *l’shon ha-ra* (slander) and suggests that Rav referred to *avak l’shon ha-ra* (fine shades [literally, dust] of slander), namely, comments or insinuations that will provoke *l’shon ha-ra*.

to the opinion of R. Yehuda (*b. Bat.* 164a). As opposed to the other two terms, *iyyun t'fillah* is not self-explanatory, nor is it clear why it is considered such a dire transgression.

*Iyyun t'fillah: A Survey of Opinions*

None of the sources quoted above explain the term, leaving its meaning obscure. Furthermore, none of the sources provide enough evidence to prove either its positive or negative connotations. Nevertheless, commentators and scholars have endeavored to explain it.

While Rashi in his commentary on *b. Shabb.* 127b (no. 1) has a positive explanation, namely *l'-khavven bi-t'fillato* (to direct one's prayer, have intention in one's prayer), he says elsewhere (commentary to no. 4) that it refers to someone who "says in his heart that his petition will surely be fulfilled since he prayed with intention."<sup>11</sup> According to Rashi, the problem is theological: a person who believes that his heartfelt prayer will effect an automatic fulfillment turns his prayer into a tool, possibly even a magical act.

The tosafists on *b. B. Bat.* (no. 5) reject this approach and claim that most people do not "expect their prayers to be fulfilled, since they are not focused enough to expect their prayers to be answered." The Tosafists understand the claim that there is no one who escapes from "this transgression," "for no one can direct [his heart] in his prayer properly" (*she-ein shum adam yakhol l'-khavven bi-t'fillato heitev*), and they quote a passage from the Talmud Yerushalmi documenting various practices of rabbis who did not direct their hearts in their prayer.<sup>12</sup> The tosafists maintain that the reproach regarding *iyyun t'fillah* has to do with those who claim that they can intentionally pray, while no one can actually do so. Elsewhere the tosafists address the tension between two contradicting understandings of the term, the positive and the negative:

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<sup>11</sup> Similar opinions are held by Rashbam, Rabenu Hananel, and the commentary ascribed to Rabenu Gershom on *b. Ber.* 55a.

<sup>12</sup> *y. Ber.* 2:4, 17b; see also the tosafists on *Rosh Hash.* 16b (lemma *iyyun t'fillah*). See Dalia Marx, "Praying as a Spiritual Act in the Rabbinic Literature" [Hebrew], forthcoming in an untitled volume on spirituality in the time of the sages, edited by Alon Goshen-Gottstein.

ויש לומר דתרי עיון תפלה יש עיון תפלה דהכא המצפה שתבא בקשתו ועיון תפלה דהתם שמכוין את לבו לתפלה.

There are two [kinds of] *iyyun t'fillah*: here [it refers to a person] who expects the fulfillment of his petition, whereas there [*b. Shabb. 127a*] [it refers to a person] who directs his heart in prayer. (*b. Ber. 34b*, lemma *g'dolah t'fillah*)<sup>13</sup>

Modern scholars have proposed different explanations for *iyyun t'fillah*. Moshe Weinfeld determines that *iyyun t'fillah* means close and meticulous examination of the prayer.<sup>14</sup> This understanding may explain the positive denotation of *iyyun t'fillah* but not its condemnation. Avigdor Shinan, on the other hand, suggests that *iyyun* means quick and inattentive browsing of the eye, but not of the heart,<sup>15</sup> an interpretation that would explain the disapproval of *iyyun t'fillah*, but not its praise.

Stefan Reif suggests that *iyyun t'fillah* may (at least in some instances) be a reference to intense meditation that aroused suspicion on the part of the rabbis as a heretical practice.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Elliot Wolfson assumes it refers to a meditation in which the worshipper imagines God in front of him (“I have set the Lord always before me,” Ps 16:8).<sup>17</sup>

A completely different suggestion is made by Israel Ta-Sh'ma, who claims that the term was understood by the ge'onim as the composition of *piyutim* (liturgical poems).<sup>18</sup>

Not unlike the tosafists, Menachem Katz suggests on the basis of a linguistic examination that *iyyun t'fillah* refers to a situation when

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the commentaries of the *rishonim*, see Israel Ta-Sh'ma, “Iyyun t'fillah v'-reshit ma'ase ha-piyut,” *Tarbiz* 53 (1984): 285–288.

<sup>14</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, “Sekhel, iyyun, v'-diyukh: Nitu'ah semanti,” *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. M. Cogan, B. L. Eichler, and J. H. Tigay (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1997), 103. Weinfeld further claims that although the only biblical occurrence of a verb deriving from the root *ayin-yod-nun* means “to look hatefully” (“And Saul eyed David from that day and forward,” 1 Sam 18:9), this citation suggests a meticulous and careful looking and does not necessarily have a negative connotation. Unlike Weinfeld, Katz negates the claim that the verb has a neutral meaning and argues that it denotes “hateful and resentful eying”; see Menachem Katz, “Iyyun v'-girsa: al minuah shel d'rakhei ha-limud bi-t'kufat Hazal,” ed. Y. Hanshke and S. Rosmarin, *Da'at lashon*, vol. 1, *Mehkarim ba-lashon ha-ivrit li-t'kufoteiha* (Jerusalem: Efrata, 2008), 67–84.

<sup>15</sup> Professor Shinan shared this idea with me in conversation.

<sup>16</sup> Stefan Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 113.

<sup>17</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, “Iconic Visualization and the Imaginal Body of God: The Role of Intention in the Rabbinic Conception of Prayer,” *Modern Theology* 12, no. 2 (1996): 137–162.

<sup>18</sup> Ta-Sh'ma, *Iyyun t'fillah*, 285–288.

a person checks to see whether his prayers have been accepted, is disappointed when his wishes have not been granted, and thus adopts a negative attitude toward the practice of *iyyun t'fillah*.<sup>19</sup> The positive attitudes, claims Katz, are derived from the use of the Aramaic root that denotes profound consideration.<sup>20</sup>

We mentioned above that in modern Hebrew the use of term *iyyun* follows that in the medieval literature, namely to describe the intellectual cognitive act of study and reflection.

The commentaries quoted here do not solve the question of whether there are two kinds of *iyyun t'fillah*, as the tosafists claimed,<sup>21</sup> or whether there are different attitudes toward the same practice. In other words, is *iyyun t'fillah* a case of *polysemy*, a term that embodies a number of meanings belonging to a similar semantic field, or is it a case of *homonymy*, unrelated words that have the same spelling and pronunciation?

Moreover, not only is it difficult to trace the denotative meaning of *iyyun t'fillah* in an attempt to account for both its praise and rebuke, we also do not know what the actual action that constitutes *iyyun t'fillah* is: whether it is the way people pray, or the way they reflect on their prayer.

#### *A New Understanding of iyyun t'fillah*

I would like to propose here a tentative new understanding for the term *iyyun t'fillah*. I agree with Katz, Shinan, and Weinfeld that the noun *iyyun* derives from the root *ayin-yod-nun* (as a regular nominal formation from a *pi'el* stem). But unlike them, I would argue that the meaning is “to bring to the eye,” “to uncover” what was in the state of obscurity. In our context, *iyyun t'fillah* would be the uncovering of what remains between the worshipper and the worshipped one. According

<sup>19</sup> Katz (*Iyyun*, 17) shows that the term *iyyun* does not appear in either the Palestinian sources or the good manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud, and is well documented only in the transmission process of the Talmud, namely by the savora'im and the ge'onim. On the other hand, he notes that there are many occurrences of verbs conjugated from the root *ayin-yod-nun* in Aramaic that signify profound observation.

<sup>20</sup> Katz, *Iyyun*, 81–82. He concludes by saying that his approach adds linguistic affirmation to the tosafists (*Ber.* 34b, lemma *g'dolah t'fillah*).

<sup>21</sup> See also Meiri on *b. Rosh Hash.* 16b.

to this interpretation, *yyun t'fillah* reveals what should not have been revealed, suggesting the efficacy and power of such practice.

We may liken *yyun t'fillah* (although the image is a bit anachronistic) to exposing sensitive photographic film to strong light. Overt and conscious dealing with prayer can be a very powerful act, but it is also a threatening one; therefore it attracted ambivalent and conflicting attitudes.

Let us consider the role and symbolism of *ayin*, “eye” (*ayin-yod-nun*). The eye serves in the Jewish tradition as a symbol of incitement and temptation.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the eye embodies the essential human ability to distinguish between good and bad.<sup>23</sup>

The eye is a powerful organ and at the same time is extremely vulnerable. It is, in a way, a checkpoint between what exists outside one's body and mind and what is inside. It “shoots” the external reality and transmits it to the consciousness. On the other, the “translation” of what is seen by the eye constitutes one's perception of reality.<sup>24</sup>

The eye is a liminal organ and much has been written about the fact that liminality may provoke uneasiness and sometimes even clinical anxiety.<sup>25</sup> If the eyes are the “windows of the soul,” then they may embody liminality also in the tension between religious behavior and spiritual intention (*kavanah*).<sup>26</sup> Thus we can understand both the

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<sup>22</sup> For example: “That you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you use to go astray” (Num 15:39); “Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched-forth necks and wanton eyes” (Isa 2:16).

<sup>23</sup> “That you may look upon it [the *tzitzit*], and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them” (Num 15:39). Seeing can lead to wrongdoing, but it also leads to cognitive comprehension and proper conduct.

<sup>24</sup> The psychoanalyst Abraham Karl suggests that the eye is a symbol that represents both female as well as male sexuality; see his *Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis*, 2nd ed., trans. D. Bryan and A. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 179–184. While Karl emphasizes especially the male symbolism of the eye, Ya'akov Nacht stresses the eye as an organ that symbolizes the woman's beauty in Jewish sources, and even the feminine genitalia; Ya'akov Nacht, *Simlei ishah* (Tel Aviv: Va'ad talmidav v'hanikhav shel ha-m'haber, 1959), 183–184.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere I trace the two religious paths documented in the classical rabbinic literature: the first emphasizes the importance of the cognitive emotional intentionality, and the second stresses the importance of accurate and precise performance of the religious commandments (see Marx, “Praying,” forthcoming).

intensity of the action of *iyyun t'fillah* and the challenges it presents; this explains the conflicting attitudes toward the practice in the sources.<sup>27</sup>

The complex symbolism of the eye guarantees that the verbal noun *iyyun* is charged with meaning. The noun *ayin* indicates not only the organ of sight but also a spring of water. One who *m'ayyen* in his prayer reveals what is concealed and hidden in the depths.

Water is a sign of blessing, especially in the land of Israel, where it is not always available. But when water is not controlled, it can cause destruction. Still when the concealed source of water is revealed, the water can dry up and its life-giving properties are lost: so too, perhaps, religious feelings remain vital only when concealed and secret.<sup>28</sup> The eye itself is a source of water, and its tears externalize innermost feelings. Crying is a powerful religious act, as R. El'azar said:

מיום שחרב בית המקדש ננעלו שערי תפילה... וואף על פי ששערי תפילה  
ננעלו, שערי דמעה לא ננעלו (בבלי ברכות ל"ב, ע"ב).

From the day on which the temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed.... But though the gates of prayer are closed, the gates of tears are not closed. (*b. Ber.* 32b)

In this view, the tear has an approved and even subversive path toward the divine, as it can bypass the institutionalized system of appeal established by the rabbis; therefore it is perceived as threatening.

The importance of prayer to the rabbis is indisputable,<sup>29</sup> but the semantic richness of the term *iyyun t'fillah* suggests that for some of the rabbis, prayer is an act that needs to be performed but not discussed or even meditated upon. The complex attitudes of the sages toward any reflective or para-liturgical contemplation of prayer may indicate a dimension of embarrassment and discomfort. Whatever the exact

<sup>27</sup> Another understanding of the term *iyyun t'fillah* is not addressed in this paper. The noun *iyyun* is derived from *ayin*, a term that also means fortune or misfortune (*ayin ha-ra*) and may indicate reliance on luck; hence the reluctance of the rabbis to depend on it and their comparison of a person who relies on *iyyun t'fillah* to a person who relies on a wall that threatens to fall.

<sup>28</sup> For example, the midrash about King David who, while digging the foundations for the temple in Jerusalem, nearly flooded the entire world with the water that overflowed from the abyss. He managed to keep the water away, but the resulting dryness almost put the world on the brink of extinction. Finally "he recited fifteen ascending [psalms]," which raised the water to the proper level (*b. Sukk.* 53a–b; *y. Sanh.* 10b).

<sup>29</sup> We do find, though, rabbinic sayings that indicate that prayer and study were two competing concepts and for many, the study was more important than the prayer. See, for example, *m. Shabb.* 1:2 and the talmudic discussion in *b. Shabb.* 9b–11a.

meaning of *yyun t'fillah* (and the explanation provided here is as tentative as those that came before it)—a practice having to do with prayer, praying, or reflection on prayer—provoked both rabbinic praise and condemnation, perhaps testifying to an uneasiness with worship and prayer.

*Iyyun t'fillah and the Religious Experience of Rabbinic Prayer*

The different meanings attributed to *yyun t'fillah* indicate that there were varied attitudes toward the experience of prayer and reflection upon it. For our discussion it does not matter whether we have different attitudes toward the same practice or whether the term had two different meanings, we can identify a sense of rabbinic reluctance to deal with the experiential, nonverbal aspect of prayer. Prayer is a religious behavior and, although it has clear rules and regulations, it is essentially spontaneous, idiosyncratic and uninstitutionalized, and therefore uncontrollable.

Standing in prayer before God, even if done in a public quorum of worshippers, is a private situation marked by the merging, blending, and undermining of boundaries. Moments of prayer are a capsule in time to which regulations and norms need not apply, and thus, metaphorically (and according to the rabbis, also literally), even if a snake is wrapped around the worshipper's foot, it cannot harm him (*m. Ber.* 5:1).

Although Jewish prayers are known to be particularly verbal (unlike many Eastern practices, for example), the experience of prayer cannot, by definition, be encapsulated in words. The sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud were schooled in answering legal questions regarding food, Shabbat, ritual purity, and so forth. All are questions of boundaries and categories. So, too, are discussions regarding the timing, wording, and physical gestures of prayer, but the existential state of mind of a person who addresses his Creator has no limits and boundaries. No rules can regulate this encounter and no authority can supervise it. The sages understood the appeal of this limitless situation, but it also made them feel uneasy.

The experience in prayer of normal worshippers, not only that of especially spiritual people, is *yyun*—exposure to the eye, a glance behind the curtain. Because it may prove so powerful and efficacious, the sages were concerned about what the worshipper might wish for, be it untimely rains or the harm of another.

The anxiety around prayer goes even deeper—its timing, wording, and external attributes may be determined and overseen, but the *experience* of prayer is uncontrollable. It defies definition, categorization, and quantification. Perhaps this is why rabbinic Judaism limited prayer's time and wording, determined its practical aspects, and demanded restraint and self-control. The following tale serves as an illustration:

A certain [prayer leader] went down in the presence of R. Ḥanina and said: O God, the great, mighty, terrible, majestic, powerful, awful, strong, fearless, sure, and honored. He [R. Ḥanina] waited till he had finished when he said to him: Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why do we want all this? (*b. Ber.* 33b; *Meg.* 25a.; see also *y. Ber.* 9:1, 12d; *Midrash T'hilim* (ed. Buber), Psalm 19, p. 85)

The common explanation of R. Ḥanina's rebuke of the prayer leader who prolonged and added to his prayer is that a human cannot express the greatness of God, and any deviation from the accepted version is perceived as haughtiness.<sup>30</sup> However, I propose that the reproach might express uneasiness at the sight of a person who follows an unconventional path in his prayer—a path that may prove to be an alternative and powerful route toward the divine, since God may accede to the request of this untraditional worshipper who “like a son importunes his father to grant his request.”<sup>31</sup>

Such is the midrash concerning the prayer of the sinful king Manasseh: “And he [Manasseh] prayed unto Him; and he was entreated [*va-y'ater*] of Manasseh, and heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God” (2 Chr 33:13). It seems that the rabbis had in front of them **וַיַּחֲתֵר** (undermined, subverted) instead of **וַיַּעֲתֵר**.<sup>32</sup> R. Shimeon ben Yoḥai teaches:

<sup>30</sup> This explanation has later acquired an authoritative status due to the apophatic theology of Maimonides, in which only negative attributions of God may be considered correct; see, for example, *Moreh n'vuḥim* 1:58–59.

<sup>31</sup> *m. Ta'an.* 3:8. The tale of Ḥoni the circle drawer inspired many similar tales about pious individuals; see for example *b. Ta'an.* 23a–26a. Lee Levine shows that the rabbis had difficulties with the institution of the synagogue (and clearly felt more at home in the house of study), since they did not have control over the synagogue and its activities. The rabbis participated in this institution, claims Levine, in a rather limited manner. Their reputation as the dominant figures in the institution of the synagogue is a reflection of their status and role in later generations. Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 466–498.

<sup>32</sup> This is quite a reasonable exchange that could have occurred due to the resemblance between these two guttural consonants, particularly in the pronunciation of the people of the Galilee (*b. Erub.* 53b; *y. Ber.* 2:4, 4d).

What is meant by, “And he prayed [וַיַּחְתֵּר, literally, subverted or dug] unto him,” and an opening was made for him. Should it not [read] “and was entreated of him”? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be he, made him a kind of opening [מַחְתֵּרֵת] in the heavens, in order to accept him with his repentance, on account of God’s attribute of justice. (*b. Sanh.* 103a)

This tale may reveal rabbinic anxiety when a person, expressing genuine prayer, can reach God and find favor with him. God and this individual who has successfully invoked him might present a united front against (or worse, without regard of) institutionalized religion. R. El’azar’s dictum about the “gates of tears” that remained open even after the destruction of the temple suggests a situation where institutionalized religion has locked its gates; now the only way to have direct, efficacious communication with God is the personal, noninstitutional one. Perhaps this is why Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of public prayer, stressing that “God stands in the congregation of God” (Ps 82:1),<sup>33</sup> since one can inspect and eye the individual in a public setting more efficiently.<sup>34</sup>

This understanding of *yyun t’fillah* describes a yearning to address God without inspection or mediation. The responses of some of the sages inform us about the danger they attached to it because of assumptions about its powerfulness and efficacy.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This verse is cited as a proof text for the question, “And how do you know that if ten people pray together the divine presence is with them?” (*b. Ber.* 6a). Gershom Scholem has well described the institutionalized nature of prayer in Judaism: “Prayer [as an institution] is the embodiment of the religious society; it is a public phenomenon in Judaism. . . . [It is] not the outpouring of the soul of the individual. . . . It is the public acceptance of the yoke of heaven’s kingdom. . . . that has a maximal measurement of moderation, of soberness, of restraint from any sort of wild expression of the soul in its contact with God. None of this is mentioned in any way in the text of the prayer.” Gershom Scholem, *Ha-kabalah b<sup>2</sup>-Provans*, ed. R. Shatz (Jerusalem, 1986), 75–76, my translation.

<sup>34</sup> Reif refers to this possibility (*Judaism*, 113).

<sup>35</sup> An example is the attempt of Ima Shalom to prevent her husband, R. Eliezer, from falling on his face (*b. B. Metz* 59b). The common interpretation of her act is that she was afraid that her husband would seek revenge (against Rabban Gamaliel, her brother), but at the same time we may assume that she was concerned with the very power and efficacy of the prayer itself, fearing that a heartfelt prayer may cause revenge even if revenge was not requested.