

"ADONAI, OPEN MY LIPS": PREPARING TO PRAY ACCORDING TO THE VILNA GAON

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Daniel Weiss has presented us with a challenging and provocative rendering of the uses of the word 'you' in Jewish prayer. He begins by showing how 'you' in Jewish liturgy is best, and most naturally, expressed without any specification, that is, with no addressee. There are, of course, many instances when specification is given (e.g. "who is like you among the gods" etc.) but he argues that the more natural, and prayerful, renditions would simply say "who is like 'you'" without any referent or comparison. This analysis calls us to sever prayer from relation (relation always having a specified 'you') and make it an exercise in moral education (that is, the de-objectification of the 'other,' any 'other,' as the archetype of human relation and divine imitation). He writes, "If conceptualizations attach to the 'you,' the addressee is no longer pure address, and the addressee has become an object." For Weiss, the 'you' alone stands for pure relation, "a form of practice in saying 'you.' The pure 'you' of prayer, when transferred to the human realm [maybe it is always

in the human realm, s.m.] becomes the ethical 'you' of true personal relation."

At the conclusion of his essay, Weiss offer a few examples of how one might apply this 'you' of pure relation to various liturgical formulas. His last example is the well-known short prelude to the Amidah prayer (also known as the Eighteen Benedictions) traditionally recited thrice daily. As the worshipper stands in preparation for entering into the silent prayer of the Amidah he or she silently recites the following formula, "Adonai [My lord] open my lips and I will speak your praises." The plain-sense meaning of this formula seems clear enough. The worshipper acknowledges that even the act of prayer is, in fact, an act in which God participates, or initiates, an act where the worshipper asks for divine assistance, suggesting that without such assistance the human could not stand and open his/her mouth in praise of the creator. Weiss understands this differently. He suggests this formula as the worshipper's request/desire for the creation of an "I" that can then address the 'you' in pure relation. In Buberean fashion, the "I" does not pre-exist the relation for Weiss – it is created by it. Yet here the relation is no real relation (there is no addressee), even of an I-Thou – it is, rather, a request to become an "I" to be able to say 'you,' to be able to approach the other, the divine other, the human other, in pure relation. This, argues Weiss, is the highest form of being human and thus the highest praise of God.

I would like to present a kabbalistic text here that offers quite a different understanding of this formula, yet one that may serve as an interlocutor to Weiss' ethical rendering. The text reflects a teaching of the great scion of Lithuanian Jewry Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, better known as the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797).¹ The GRA (as he is commonly

¹ The word "gaon" literally mean "genius" but was a specific title given to the heads of the Babylonian academies in Sura and Pumpadetha from the eighth through tenth centuries CE. It was used infrequently after the closing of these academies and the culmination of what is known as the Gaonic period of Jewish intellectual history. The use of the term suggests that the individual in question transcends his own historical period. It is largely used euphemistically although it is worth noting that the Vilna Gaon was said to have had the authority to counter rabbinic opinions of the earlier medieval period, something highly

called) was one of the most important Jewish figures in modernity. He is considered the figurehead of the Lithuanian School of Jewish study and practice, many of his customs have become religious norms, his legal decisions garner the utmost respect, and his commentaries of the Tanakh, Talmud and legal codes are widely studied. While he was the well-known polemicist against Hasidism (which he considered a heretical 'sect'), he was also an accomplished Kabbalist and arguably published more kabbalistic commentaries than exoteric works.²

The following text appears in a commentary to the siddur (book of Jewish liturgy) published under the title *Siddur ha-GRA: be-Nigle u be-Nistar* (Jerusalem, 1971). As far as we know, the GRA never wrote a commentary to the siddur. This text, then, is a compilation of comments that appear in other works that relate to the liturgy. There are various collections of this nature. Our text is taken from "*Likkutei ha-GRA*" ("Gleanings of the GRA") that includes kabbalistic commentaries on the liturgy.

Before we move to the text, a number of preliminary comments are in order since the GRA takes for granted an intimate familiarity with the liturgy and both the rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions. The small section translated below is a meditation on the liturgical formula "Adonai, open my lips and I will speak your praises" mentioned above. It is built on the kabbalistic assumption developed in the Zohar and elsewhere of a Godhead divided into two major parts: a masculine side represented by

uncharacteristic in Jewish jurisprudence. In any case, he is one of the only post-Gaonic Jewish thinkers to be universally referred to by the label "gaon."

² For the most recent book in English on the GRA see Immanuel Etkes, *The Vilna Gaon: The Man and His Image* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). There has yet to be a detailed study of his kabbalistic world-view. For some preliminary studies see Alan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1997), esp. pp. 29-49, and Alan Brill, "The Mystical Path of the Gaon of Vilna," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3-1 (1993): 131-151. Cf. my "Deconstructing the Mystical: The Anti-Mystical Kabbalism in Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin's Nefesh Ha-Hayyim," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 9-1 (1999): 21-67. Many, but not all, of his kabbalistic commentaries have been collected in one large volume *Be-Kitvei ha-GRA be-Inyanei Kabbala* (Israel: Yadid Books, 2003). It should be noted that the text presented here from "*Likkutei ha-GRA*" does not appear in this volume.

the term *Kudsha Barikh Hu* (The Holy One Blessed be He) and a feminine side called *Shekhina* (or *Shekhintei*). The cosmic drama of creation is that the couple is alienated from one another largely due to human sin. Their union becomes the central focus of kabbalistic prayer according to the Zohar and the lens through which these kabbalists view redemption. The vocation of Israel is to create the proper conditions for this union through the performance of mitzvot which clears the Creation of the demonic forces that prevent this union. Another component relevant to this text is the division of three angelic groups called *Hayyot*, *Ofanim*, and *Serafim*. These groups appear often in the prophetic writings and, specific to this text, play a central role in the vision of Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1 and 10. While these angels recite praises to God, the Talmud maintains (e.g. b.T. Hullin 101b, 102a) that angelic praises are not as cherished by God as the praises of human beings (specifically Jews).

"Adonai, Open My Lips and I will Speak Your Praises" **"Likkutei ha-GRA"**

The human being (*ha-Adam*) is the image of Metatron who makes a chariot for God *Kudsha Barikh Hu*) and His consort (*Shekhina*) which are like body (*guf*) and soul (*nefesh*).³ The 248 limbs of the soul (*nefesh*) [of the *Shekhina*] are channels (*petihin*) to draw down spirit to the body (*guf*) which consists of spirit (*ruah*) and *nefesh*, or *ruah* to *nefesh*.⁴ The *nefesh* is joined

³ God is likened to the soul that is housed by the body (*Shekhina*) both of which dwell on Metatron or, in this case the human being by means of prayer. It should also be noted that the term "Adam" which I rendered as "human being" is more accurately Jew or, more specifically, "male Jew."

⁴ The sages claim that human beings have 248 limbs (loosely defined) and 365 sinews. This equals 613, the numbers of commandments, 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. The idea here is to correlate the human body with the Torah. When the individual serves God through mitzvot, he is utilizing his 613 parts to fulfill the divine will (613 commandments). Here the GRA is cited the common zoharic formula that the supernal "bodies" also have 613 parts that correlate to the 613 parts of the human body. Regarding the last part of this sentence, it is unclear to me what the GRA has in mind. He may be

with the body.⁵ During the recitation of the Shema [which immediately precedes the Amidah in the Morning Prayer] and the Amidah (the Eighteen Benedictions), including the silent rendition,⁶ there is not one of these 248 limbs of the *Shekhina* that is not open to receive Him (*Kudsha Barikh Hu*). This is the meaning of the phrase “Adonai open my lips and my mouth.” The numerical value of “lip” (*safa* – 385) is the same as “*Shekhina* (385) [that is open to receive].” The *Shekhina* is Adonai [as in “Adonai Open My Lips”].⁷

In the public recitation of the Amidah by the cantor the [masculine] divine name YHVH is placed on the [feminine] divine name Adonai in every one of her limbs [of the 248 limbs of the *nefesh* mentioned above]. This process embodies the secret meaning of *Hashmal* (divine glow).⁸ In the silent rendition of the Amidah this *Hashmal* is an opening to receive. This is also where the petitioner speaks [the worshipper speaks his/her

referring to the fact that the body itself contains both *ruah* and *nefesh* and thus the *nefesh* of the *Shekhina* filters down into the *ruah* and *nefesh* of the body.

⁵ This means that the *nefesh* is the lowest part of the soul and thus the part connected to the physical body. There is thus an intimate connection between soul (as *nefesh*) and body and also between God and His *Shekhina*.

⁶ In public prayer (with a quorum of ten males in traditional halakha) there are two renditions of the Amidah, the first silent and the second a repetition of the Amidah recited aloud by the cantor. These two renditions will become relevant later in the text.

⁷ The mouth here takes on an erotic sense of the orifice that, as *Shekhina*, is open to receive male effluence. The act of prayer is an act of the interpenetration of *Kudsha Barikh Hu* with the *Shekhina* through the act of speech (one must open one’s mouth to speak).

⁸ The term *Hashmal*, literally “glow” is taken from the Ezekiel’s vision of the supernal chariot. It has many meanings in the Zohar. It seems, however, here the GRA takes it from b.T. Hagigah 13a/b where *Hashmal* is defined as “speaking angels/animals (*Hayyot*) of fire” in Ezekiel’s vision. Rashi defines these angelic/animal *Hayyot* “fire-speaking creatures,” that fire emerges when they speak. The notion in Hagigah that *hashmal* is sometimes silent and sometimes verbal is taken from the word *hashmal*. The first part of the word “*hash*” means silent and the second part “*mal*” refers to speech. Lurianic Kabbala understands *hashmal* from the Aramaic “*malel*” to crush or to break. Thus, *Hashmal* breaks evil but protecting the core of holiness. The numerical value of *hashmal* is 378, the same as *malbush* or garment. See Hayyim Vital, *Etz Hayyim*, “*Sha’ar Arikh Anpin*,” 13:14, p. 201. Cf. Nahman of Bratslav *Likkutei MoHaRa’n* 1:21, 16, p. 142. I want to thank Moshe Mykoff for his suggestions regarding *hashmal*.

prayer during the silent rendition].⁹ In the public repetition of the Amidah, everyone is silent and listens to the mouth (*peh*) of the cantor [as opposed to] the silent Amidah where everyone speaks h/er personal prayer.

In this instance, the cantor serves as an example of the divine (*dugmat Kudsha Barikh Hu*), as the Talmud teaches, "When words go forth from God's mouth, the fiery angels/animals (*Hayyot*) of the chariot are silent."¹⁰ "When words go forth from God" refers to when the [male] YHVH is placed on [the feminine] Adonai. This is because when "voice" and "word" are united (God and His *Shekhina*) there is silence. This occurs when the cantor speaks and the community answers "amen" [a word] that embodies (*sh-kolel*) both divine names [YHVH and Adonai].

During silent prayer the name YHVH is still in the realm of thought and Adonai is in the realm of speech (as it says, "and all the limbs of the *Shekhina* are open to receive"). At that moment, the side of the left [equated with the feminine and thus Adonai] calls out for her sustenance. The *Hayyot* roar during the recitation of the Shema. With a voice they speak, "YHVH!" The *Ofanim* blow (*mizafzafim*) during the silent Amidah, "Adonai!" At this time [during silent prayer] right and left, YHVH and Adonai are separated. In this manner the repetition of the Amidah by the cantor unifies YHVH and Adonai in state of union (*yihud*). This phase of repetition is the place of *Serafim* which is why they are mentioned in the *kedusha* [the section of the Amidah that can only be recited during the repetition when there is a prayer].¹¹

⁹ That is, it is called "silent" but actually it constitutes the spoken word of the worshipper while in the repetition of the Amidah the worshiper is silent and listens to the voice of the cantor.

¹⁰ B.T. Hagigah 13b. See also "*Be-Inyanei ha-Merkaba de-Yehzekel*," in *Be-Kitvei ha-GRA be-Inyanei Kabbala*, p. 650.

¹¹ They only appear in the *kedusha* of the Morning Service on the Sabbath and not on weekdays.

Comment:

The GRA here views the act of prayer not only as an act that unifies the disparate dimensions of the deity but more poignantly, in my view, conjoins the *Shekhina* with the worshipper. Prayer, as a cosmic trope and not merely a human practice, is the act of opening the channels of (feminine) receptivity creating the conditions for divine unification (*yihud*). According to the GRA this formula now reads “Adonai, the *Shekhina*, is now open and receptive and because of that my mouth, which is also the *Shekhina*, can now speak your praises.”

Yet this declaration of receptivity, embodied in the silent Amidah, is only the initial stage. This is because unity, or perhaps in our context, true relation depicted here erotically, requires a response. Unrequited love is no relation. The declaration of openness “Adonai, open my lips” is quite different than the request of “God, please open my lips.” For the GRA this is not a request but rather a mating call of the *Shekhina* and of the worshipper.

The reason this itself is not sufficient is that the speech-act in silent prayer (and the GRA clearly enjoys the paradox of “speech as silence”) has the worshipper embodying the receptive role of the *Shekhina* precisely at the moment s/he is engaged in the speech-act. Thus the silent Amidah, which is the “prayer of silent speech,” only sets the stage for the union of God and His *Shekhina* (which thus fulfils the purpose of prayer – achieving pure relation) in the repetition of the Amidah by the cantor.

The public recitation of the Amidah silences the worshipper (as s/he listens to the cantor’s repetition) making h/er able to fulfill the initial declaration of receptivity “open my lips,” as the GRA writes in a fairly graphic erotic image, “In the public recitation of the Amidah the (masculine) divine name YHVH is placed on the (feminine) divine name Adonai in every one of her limbs (of the 248 limbs of the *nefesh*).”

The term “*Hashmal*” is now deployed to exemplify the notion of silence and speech. Prayer must be both verbal and silent to have its desired affect of erotic union. In the silent Amidah the worshipper declares h/er alliance to the *Shekhina* via emulation but then immediately undermines that by speaking, that is, by praying. Thus s/he must

accompany that by the silence of listening to the cantor who, likened to God, speaks words that (even) silence the angels. The "word" going forth from God here is a euphemism here for sexual union, the feminine is silenced by the act of penetration – penetration of the word as the tool of (pro)creation. When the "voice" of desire is fulfilled through the "word" of penetration, there is silence which, at least here, is fully embodied speech – pure relation. "Amen" the only words the worshipper can now say, is thus the culmination, and fulfillment, of "Adonai open my lips."

The GRA returns once more to the silent Amidah to suggest that the speech of silent prayer is incomplete because there is no fusion of thought and word (because the speech is a silent speech, or thought- speech, the prayers are spoken silently (*be-lakhash*)). It is in this deficient state of human speech that the angels offer their praises; two groups "roaring" and "blowing" the names of God that are still separate (*Adonai* and *Kudsha Barikh Hu*) and calling for their union. It is only the *Seraphim* that dwell in that union, as only they are mentioned as praising God during the repetition of the Amidah on the Sabbath.

While there is much more to say about this terse meditation, for our very limited purposes, what, if anything, can be said about the GRA's comment and Daniel Weiss' notion of 'you' as pure relation? The intellectual context here is obviously quite different. Yet given that difference, there are a few things that might be worth contemplating. Weiss is looking for a concept of pure relation that moves beyond the objectification of the addressee. The GRA seems interested in the facilitation of union but, in doing so, makes a few interesting comments about speech, silence, declarative receptivity, and its fulfillment through the act of saying "amen."

For the GRA the act of prayer is an act of being receptive to the possibility of pure relation (*yihud*) that requires both speech and silence, silent speech (it is, of course, ironic that though we begin by saying "open my lips so my mouth can speak your praises," the worshipper then continues silently) and verbal silence (the relational response of "amen!"). This requires the worshipper (and the *Shekhina*) to be open yet not passive, to embody the *Hashmal*, the glow that protects and the glow that

“crushes.” The silent speech initiated by “Adonai, open my lips” is only completed by the verbal silence of “amen.” Can we say that, for the GRA, pure relation is not total receptivity but rather a receptivity cultivated by the speech-act (silently rendered)? To return to Weiss’ language, is the “I” cultivated here precisely in the declaration of receptivity? And is the pure relation, then, the human act of saying “amen” upon hearing God’s words (the cantor, the fire that silences the angels, the loving penetrative sex-act that silences the *Shekhina*)?

Finally, it is relevant, perhaps central, that “amen” already requires relation. We do not say amen to our own blessings only the blessings of others and we can only say amen to prayers and blessings we hear clearly. And by saying “amen” to another, what exactly are we saying, according to the GRA? We are, in fact, affirming pure relation (the union of *Kudsha Barikh Hu* and His *Shekhina*). So while prayer begins in solitude (“Adonai, open my lips”) it can only be completed in relation to the other (in order to say “amen”).

Does all this exceed what the GRA may have had in mind? Likely. But for this exercise this is beside the point. The question of the “I” who prays has been central to many kabbalists from the middle ages to modernity. For example, much is made of this question in the Baal Shem Tov’s “*Amud ha-Tefilah*” in *Sefer Baal Shem Tov*. Here, the GRA offers his kabbalistic rendition of how the “I” is constructed through the lens of the preliminary formula of “Adonai, open my lips.” Based on a very different metaphysic and perhaps a different ethical sensibility, I suggest the GRA’s comment speaks, at least in part, to the question Daniel Weiss raises in his essay.