

Becoming Wholehearted: Constructing a Jewish Liturgical Asceticism

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## Abstract

This dissertation creates a Jewish theology of asceticism focused on articulating the ideals toward which Jewish observant life is directed, a method for reflecting on the ‘ends’ of a Jewish life well lived in relationship to practice. I apply this theological asceticism to an analysis of Jewish liturgical prayer (*tefilat keva*), arguing that it is a desire-forming practice that causes practitioners to reimagine human flourishing and what leads to true satisfaction.

My approach to this topic is modeled on a careful analysis and evaluation of the Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley’s “new asceticism” in light of Charles Taylor’s “maximal demand.” I augment Coakley’s definition of asceticism to fit a Jewish theological anthropology articulated by Rabbi Israel Salanter. I then apply this ascetic discourse to the study of the daily practice of liturgy.

The Jewish liturgical asceticism I develop draws together elements from the Catholic James Fagerberg’s liturgical theology, the Presbyterian theologian James K. A. Smith’s theories about how liturgy forms a social-imaginary, and R. Israel Salanter’s teachings on the formation of desire (*ta’avah*) through the practice of *hitpa’alut*. The dissertation ends with an application of this method for theologically reflecting on the desire forming power of a daily prayer life through a close reading of elements of the weekday morning service, *shacharit*.

This dissertation offers a Jewish theological account of the formative power of liturgical prayer on human desire. It also creates an approach for thinking more broadly about desire formation as a key component in the ideal goals of a normative Jewish lifestyle.

This theological project will benefit communities of practice looking to better understand the wisdom of their inherited spiritual practices, educators and communal rabbis looking to commend traditional Jewish ways of life, Jewish theologians looking for an approach to discussing the ideals within Jewish life in a way that stays rooted in practice, and scholars of Jewish liturgy who are looking for methods for studying liturgy as a formative act and not merely an historical text.

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## 1.0 QUESTIONS AND METHODS FOR CONSTRUCTING A JEWISH LITURGICAL ASCETICISM

Who are we becoming as we pray? How does Jewish daily prayer capacitate the Jewish people? What does prayer have to teach us about the “ends” of a Jewish life well lived? A rabbinic tradition records Simon the Righteous as saying, “On three things the world stands: on the Torah, on Divine worship (*avodah*), and on acts of loving-kindness.”<sup>1</sup> Our contemporary Jewish world talks about both Torah study and acts of kindness, often engaged in under the heading *tikkun olam*, as crucial for creating engaged Jews with the knowledge and commitment to pass Judaism on to future generations.<sup>2</sup> But what about

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah *Pirke Avot* 1:2. Translation from Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur*, American Edition, trans. Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 640.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to the history of the currently popular ideology of “*tikkun olam*” see Gilbert S. Rosenthal, “Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (April 2005), 214-240. For a relatively recent study of its role in American Jewish life see, Jonathan Krasner, “The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25, no. 3-4 (2014), <https://jcpa.org/article/place-tikkun-olam-american-jewish-life1/>. The advent of universal education in Europe inspired Jews in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to create yeshiva institutes for educating the Jewish masses. The centrality of Torah study has continued to grow. For a history of nineteenth-century Jewish education in eastern Europe see Shaul Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis, and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010). On the growth of the yeshivas in Europe and their democratization of learning see Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning* (UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012). For an introduction to Orthodox day school education as a central component of the changes within twentieth-century American Orthodox Judaism see, Jeffrey Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 199-225. On the wildly popular movement to do daily Talmud study see Uriel Heilman, “90,000-Plus Crowded in N. J. Cheers Siyum HaShas,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (JTA), <http://www.jta.org/2012/08/02/life-religion/90000-plus-crowd-in-n-j-cheers-siyum-hahas>. See also Michele Chabin, “Women’s Talmud Study Takes Big Leap Forward,” *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (JTA), <https://www.jta.org/2019/11/27/ny/womens-talmud-study-takes-big-leap-forward>. On the role of deliberative Torah study on ethical and spiritual self-cultivation see Elie Holzer, *Attuned Learning: Rabbinic Texts on Habits of the Heart in Learning Interactions* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016). Finally, for an introduction to the central importance of Torah study to the purpose of the Jewish people see Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1989), 102-137.

divine worship? Does a distinct Jewish 'way of being' depend on divine worship? Does the future of the Jewish world stand on worship? How might we come to understand *avodah* as equally powerful for the formation of a Jewish self as Torah study and acts of communal responsibility and care?

Liturgical asceticism, a way of looking at liturgy within Christian theological circles, offers a model for how contemporary Jews might better understand the formative power of traditional Jewish prayer. Liturgical asceticism approaches structured communal prayer as the locus for the formation of desire, ushering an individual into the life of a community that transcends time and place. Prayer teaches people what to love and a vision of a life worth living; it situates them through a story that is bigger than themselves and opens an ongoing space of reflection on life in light of the liturgically inherited vision of human flourishing. In short, liturgical prayer creates *actively* religious people by forming their desires.<sup>3</sup> A Jewish ascetic approach to studying liturgical prayer focuses on the act of praying traditional communal liturgy as a primary force for the socialization of Jews through its formation of their loves.

This project is about the construction of a Jewish liturgical asceticism, a method for studying liturgy that focuses attention on the ascetic formation happening through liturgical practice. Gavin Flood describes ritual's role in the formation of the ascetic self as the participation in a "tradition-specific becoming" based on conforming the self to become a

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph J. Schwab, the educational theorist, argues in what has become a classic essay, "Eros and Education: A Discussion of One Aspect of Discussion (1954)," in *Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education: Selected Essays*, ed. Ian Westbury and Neil J. Wilkof (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 105-132, 109, that the outcome of successful liberal education is "*actively* intelligent people." He emphasizes 'actively' because he wants to convey the idea of a person who does something, rather than a person who knows something. The person he describes expresses an erotic "energy of wanting" toward learning, growth, and development. This is analogous to what I mean by engaged Jews, or the creation of a Jewish 'self': a person who acts as a Jew in everything they do and has a driving desire for growth and development toward a vision of the ends of Jewish life.

link in the chain of transmission of a tradition.<sup>4</sup> This project, while borrowing from Christian theologians a set of tools for understanding how liturgy functions in an ascetic way, is focused on articulating a tradition-specific understanding of how desire is formed through Jewish liturgical practice. A basic assumption of this project is that ritual formation operates in similar ways on Jews and Christians because we all share the same human nature.<sup>5</sup> But how we explain human nature, and the reason for a practice, and the ends to which the practice tends, are all tradition specific.<sup>6</sup>

After analyzing a variety of Christian theological frameworks for asceticism, liturgical theology, and liturgical asceticism in the first chapters of this project, I turn to the work of R. Israel Salanter. Salanter provides me with a Jewish theological anthropology and a vision of an ideal Jewish life which allows me to construct a Jewish discourse for an ascetic ideal. I argue that *keva* (habitual and structured) prayer practice forms *ta'avah* (desire) on a pre-conscious level through engaging our imagination, emotion, and bodies in a story of ultimate concern for the sake of achieving a flourishing Jewish life as a wholehearted servant of God. Considered from this methodological approach, Jewish liturgy acts as an ascetic practice, shaping our loves and forming our desires toward the ultimate goal of

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<sup>4</sup> Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 218.

<sup>5</sup> Human nature can be in actuality the same even if described and understood in tradition specific ways. Traditions will highlight different aspects of that nature and even disagree with one another about the ways in which human nature should be described without changing the fundamental reality of shared human-ness. This idea in Judaism is grounded in the creation story that unites all humans as descendants of Adam and inheritors of the divine image. For an introduction to the topic in biblical and rabbinic literature and its application in normative, legal and ritual life see Yair Lorberbaum, *In God's Image: Myth, Theology and Law in Classical Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> G.K. Chesterton makes a similar point about the similarity between pagan and Christian festivals in *Orthodoxy, The Collected Works*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 333.

*shlemut*, wholeness of heart in the service of God.<sup>7</sup> *Tefilat keva* is a gift of God, stewarded by the Jews of the past, for the ongoing formation of desire.<sup>8</sup>

Michael Wyschogrod, a twentieth-century orthodox Jewish theologian, summarized the challenge of Jewish existence as “the election of the seed of Abraham... and the endless struggle by this people against its election...”<sup>9</sup> He is pointing out both the grandeur and the tragedy of Jewish existence. The Jewish people are predominately constituted by a people born with a holy destiny. But the ability to achieve this inherited destiny requires the people to want it; it requires desire forming practices. In our own time, an age of great social and cultural mobility, the constraints on abandoning the project are almost non-existent. The social membrane is porous. Desire forming practices are even more crucial for inspiring the will to carry on. It is my contention that *tefila*, prescribed Jewish prayer, is a wise and powerful practice through which Jews are taught the “ends” of a Jewish life well lived. Through initiation into the sacred story of our people, liturgy communicates what it is important to remember and what is our hope. Through the habitual, embodied, and emotionally potent elements of our prayer practice, our desires are formed at a pre-conscious level. My construction of a Jewish liturgical asceticism draws on the thinking of the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, the Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley, the Catholic liturgical theologian James Fagerberg, and the work on liturgy of the Presbyterian

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<sup>7</sup> A biblical analysis of wholeness of heart (*lev tam*, לֵב טָמ) links the concept with integrity, purity of heart, oneness of heart, faithfulness to God, wisdom, uprightness, obedience to God’s commandments, moral uprightness, honesty, sincerity, and ultimately nearness to God. For a study of the many biblical passages that evoke this corpus of ideas about wholeheartedness see, Irene Nowell, OSB, “The Concept of Purity of Heart in the Old Testament,” in *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature*, ed. Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 17-30.

<sup>8</sup> Heschel points out that the siddur is neither the purview of the elite, nor a product of scholars. It is full of the words of the folk. Not crafted by a committee, it comes to us as an inheritance from our ancestors. See *The Earth is the Lords* (1949; rpt. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2011), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 26.

theologian James K. A. Smith. Each thinker offers a key piece in the constructing of a method for reading Jewish liturgy as an ascetic practice.

Taylor and Coakley are central to the way in which I recover ascetic discourse. They offer reasons for why our cultural moment needs a public discussion about ideal visions for human flourishing. Taylor also provides a careful analysis of why asceticism was critiqued in modernity and what are the goods that have arisen in our western culture because of those criticisms. While advocating for the return of explicit conversations within our society about what makes for a flourishing life, he creates a set of guidelines for the recovery of the ascetic. His “maximal demand” becomes the standard by which I evaluate the other examples of ascetic theology, and the standard for my own recovery of an ascetic ideal within Judaism.<sup>10</sup> Sarah Coakley’s definition of asceticism and the way she recovers spiritual practices with an eye to the possible dangerous misapplications of ascetic teachings serves as a model for my own definition of a healthy asceticism grounded in spiritual practices that addresses contemporary needs.

The Catholic liturgical theologian James Fagerberg models a theological method for liturgical asceticism. I draw from his school of thought a commitment to liturgy as the communal act of prayer through which the people enact their purpose—in Jewish language, *tefila* is a *mitzvah*, a divinely commanded act. The method also affirms the usefulness of tools and conclusions from history, sociology, etc., while affirming a primary approach to liturgy not as a human artifact, but instead as a revelatory activity, an encounter with God’s

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<sup>10</sup> Maintaining the goodness of ordinary human experience, of simple desires, is one element of Taylor’s “maximal demand,” a way of talking about transcendent ideals that can be pursued without “purging, or denigrating, ordinary fulfillments.” The other element is a concern with “bowdlerizing” the human condition. This involves lowering expectations for human flourishing to a point that “normal” people are expected to reach without too much effort and in so doing, misrepresenting the human condition. This limited, non-transcendent, approach leaves many unsatisfied, but unsure of why, and also loses track of the great variety of challenges humans face. It creates a society that has no wisdom to offer and no path toward a better life for the “deviant” because they misunderstand the full scope of human frailty. See Charles Taylor, *Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 640-641.

way of seeing. Without denying historical development, liturgical asceticism is concerned with the work of prayer as a contemporary encounter of the people and God. The Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) describes a similar posture for understanding scripture. He describes Torah as not human theology but rather God's anthropology.<sup>11</sup> Fagerberg's methodology becomes a key model for my approach to the study of liturgy. His method offered me two key elements, the study of liturgy as reflection on the act of communal prayer and liturgy as God's gift to support human flourishing. Studying the Christian liturgical theology method proved very helpful for situating my work as participating in a known field with a set of already established norms.

But Fagerberg's own of liturgical asceticism is not exegetical of liturgical life; he draws more prescriptively on the reflections of pre-modern ascetic saints. In the work of the Presbyterian James K. A. Smith, I found a model for thinking about how liturgy forms desire. In his cultural liturgies project, a three-volume work on liturgy as a source of Christian formation of desire, Smith argues that liturgy orients our desire by pre-consciously placing the worshiper within a narrative of ultimate concern that engages the praying person's imagination and body in meaningful acts of worship. Under his analysis, liturgical life becomes a countercultural force of desire formation, operating in a similar way to our wider culture, inculcating in us an alternative "social-imaginary."<sup>12</sup> Liturgical

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<sup>11</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 412. David Novak, "What is Jewish Theology?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven Kepnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 24, cites the same passage from Heschel in writing about the approach best taken for constructive Jewish theology.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171, describes the "social-imaginary" as: "...much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I'm thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underline these expectations." The "social-imaginary" is a complex web of assumptions and inclinations based on lived experience, stories, histories, images, activities, etc., that have gone into forming what a person assumes to be their most basic reality. A "social-imaginary" carries implicit pictures of the good life, of human flourishing; every imagination is framed by one, if not the same one. Taylor, 173, describes the "social-imaginary" further as "background... that largely unstructured and inarticulate

practice, in his reading, is an immersive experience in an alternative Kingdom, the Kingdom of God. Drawing on the theological anthropology of Augustine and deploying key ideas taken from continental philosophy, Smith constructs an explanation for how liturgical life is a transformational act. Smith's conclusions about how liturgy shapes desire become central to my own method for thinking about Jewish liturgical life as an ascetic activity.

The Jewish liturgical asceticism that I argue for in this project is indebted to the work of these Christian thinkers. By reading Christian theologians addressing the needs of their own communities, I was able to find models to adapt as I reflected theologically on what I see as missing from contemporary Jewish liturgical life. They helped me to understand that although the Jewish people are inheritors of a prayer practice that trains desire, we do not talk about it in this way, nor do we even consider its desire forming potential when we think about teaching it or when we craft our services. This dissertation introduces a way of talking about liturgical prayer's ascetic qualities, learned from Christian theologians, but spoken in a Jewish register. It is a constructive theological enterprise that entails the articulation of an authentic Jewish ascetic vision, the recovery of Jewish language for understanding how desire is formed, and the application to liturgical prayer of this framework for thinking about desire.

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understanding of our whole situation.... it can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines.”

## 1.1 A JEWISH COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

This dissertation is a testimony to the way religious traditions can enrich one another when we read broadly and open ourselves to learning from outside our home traditions. It is perhaps obvious to note that religions have always developed through interaction: borrowing and clashing, adopting and refuting.<sup>13</sup> In one sense, the learning from Christian sources for this project is merely the continuation of this creative process. But in another sense, it could not exist without the contemporary formation of confessional Comparative Theology as a discipline within a theology department at Boston College.<sup>14</sup> The theology department at Boston College is an uncommon place where a Jew can train in theology.<sup>15</sup>

Theology holds a marginal place in academic Jewish studies, creating a sparse field for training and conversations partners within the discipline for the Jewish theologian. In 2012 of the 255 chairs in Jewish studies registered with the *Association of Jewish Studies*, only one was explicitly designated for Jewish theology.<sup>16</sup> Seminary curriculum largely

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<sup>13</sup> For an account of the history of this kind of learning in Christianity, see Francis Clooney, *Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup> For an introduction to the contemporary renewal of Comparative Theology as a discipline see Reid Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, "The Return of Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 477-514.

<sup>15</sup> The place of theology in Judaism is disputed and there are few institutions where Jews can train in theology or where Judaism is studied theologically. For an introduction to reasons for the marginal place of theology in Judaism, see Cass Fisher, *Contemplative Nation: A Philosophical Account of Jewish Theological Language* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1-20 and David Ford, "Theology" in the *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2005), 61-79. For arguments offered in support of Jewish theology as a legitimate discipline see: Jacob Neusner, "The Tasks of Theology in Judaism: A Humanistic Program," *Journal of Religion* 59, no. 1 (1979): 71-86. Jacob Neusner, "Theology Comes Home: The Role of Theology in the Academic Study of Religion and the Role of Theology of Judaism in the Academic Study of Judaism," *Religion* 31, no. 1 (2001): 1-18.

<sup>16</sup> This data comes from Cass Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 229 n4. I was unable to find more current data from the Association for Jewish Studies. They did publish a report in 2018 on the personal identification of their membership as secular, religious, observant, etc. 59% of respondents described themselves as religious, and of those, less than half identified themselves as observant. This of course tells us nothing of their scholarly methodologies, but it demonstrates the lack of importance of religious commitment within Jewish Studies. "Association of Jewish Studies 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Survey

ignores the discipline, leading to graduates with little training in a coherent articulation of an intellectually compelling vision of Judaism for the contemporary moment.<sup>17</sup> This also highlights theology's marginal role in Judaism more broadly.<sup>18</sup> A bible scholar and teacher at one of America's leading Jewish seminaries recently concluded that "although there are Jewish theologians, there is no discipline."<sup>19</sup> The lack of a discipline perpetuates and is perpetuated by the limited number of participants and their diverse and even idiosyncratic approaches to Jewish theology which make it hard for them to be part of the same conversation.<sup>20</sup>

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Report," Oct. 5, 2018. [https://www.associationforjewishstudies.org/docs/default-source/surveys-of-the-profession/2018-ajs-survey-report-\(1\).pdf?sfvrsn=41e8a506\\_2](https://www.associationforjewishstudies.org/docs/default-source/surveys-of-the-profession/2018-ajs-survey-report-(1).pdf?sfvrsn=41e8a506_2)

<sup>17</sup> Courses in rabbinical school that might be labeled theology are frequently surveys of post-holocaust or feminist theologies. For example, see the Hebrew Union College summary of rabbinical school curriculum available here, <http://huc.edu/academics/become-rabbi/course-study>. Typically, there are one or two mandatory courses introducing Jewish philosophy or Jewish thought, but the material is taught using a detached historical approach rather than as modeling an important activity that is critical for being able to present an articulate and compelling vision of Jewish life.

<sup>18</sup> Ziony Zevit, "Jewish Biblical Theology: Whence? Why? and Whither?," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 76 (2005): 300. His assessment is corroborated by Neil Gilman's reflections on his time at the ironically named Jewish Theological Seminary, where he describes theology as held in "disdain," a reality he believes he has failed to change despite five decades of effort. See his *Doing Jewish Theology: God, Torah, and Israel in Modern Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), x. The lack of Jewish theology is also found in non-university settings that include Jewish day-schools and yeshivas. The predominate discourse is about what God requires of us, leaving the challenge of articulating an understanding of God and God's overarching relationship with the Jewish people a stunted area of thinking for many observant Jews. See Aharon E. Wexler, "Just a Thought: Jewish Theology," *The Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 20, 2012, <https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/jewish-features/just-a-thought-jewish-theology>.

<sup>19</sup> Zevit, "Jewish Biblical Theology," 338.

<sup>20</sup> For example, consider the cases of Avi Sagi, Eliezer Berkowitz, Jerome Gellman, and Elliot Wolfson. The Wittgensteinian-influenced Avi Sagi, in his *Jewish Religion after Theology*, trans. Batya Stein (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), relates to religion as a value system in which claims should be treated not as factual but instead as regulative. Contrast this with the theological realism of Eliezer Berkowitz in his *God, Man and History*, ed. David Hazony (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2004) and Jerome Gellman in his *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). These also differ from the strident apophatism of Elliot Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). For a treatment of Jewish theologians who fall on various sides of the realism/non-realism debates, see Cass Fisher, "Theological Realism and Its Alternatives," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Steve Kepnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 392-422. There are a myriad other fault lines between the few Jewish scholars who do theological reflection. Some of it is driven by their widely divergent educational expertise. For example, David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), is a natural law philosopher mostly concerned with ethics. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), is scholar of rabbinic biblical interpretation applying hermeneutics to

In the first chapter of his book, *Contemplative Nation*, Cass Fisher recently charted the many complex reasons for the marginalization of Jewish theology in the university and in Jewish religious life.<sup>21</sup> From his study, it is clear that modern scholars objected to Judaism having a theology for political and philosophical reasons, not for reasons inherent to Judaism. I will summarize some of the issues at play to help explain the marginal place of Jewish theology at present. My account in what follows relies heavily on his observations and I commend his longer analysis.

Fisher suggests the marginal place of theology in Jewish life begins in the marginalization of *aggada*. Aggadah, the narrative portions of classical rabbinic literature like the Talmud, carries a subordinate place to legal literature. There is some indication in rabbinic *midrashic* discourse itself that this subordinate position began quite early but it appears in full force under the influence of medieval rationalists.<sup>22</sup> Much later, modern scholars shared a discomfort for non-rationalist Jewish ideas and downplayed their significance. The beginnings of modern Jewish scholarship in the academy traces its origins to Germany during the ascendancy of Kant and Hegel under whose influence traditional theological language failed to seem credible.<sup>23</sup> These early scholars of Judaism shared a strong tendency toward rationalism and a commitment to the elusive idea of objectivity, and many deployed the new discipline of history to critique and overhaul Judaism to better fit demands to modernize.<sup>24</sup> These early scholars also faced a good deal of scorn for Judaism.

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theology. Art Green is a historian and translator of Hasidic thought who wrote a theology characterized by a mystical monistic pantheism. See his *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). All offer unique theological contributions, but they are not talking to one another.

<sup>21</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 1-20.

<sup>22</sup> See Fisher's analysis of Midrash *Song of Songs Rabbah* 2:5 in *Contemplative Nation*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 65, criticized nineteenth-century scholarship as religiously barren because it had an anti-theological mood.

*Aggadic* texts were used by non-Jewish scholars to depict the rabbis as fools.<sup>25</sup> Jewish scholars responded by continuing to describe *aggada* as merely homiletical and minimizing any insufficiently rationalist rabbinic claims about God.<sup>26</sup> “The desire to reframe Christian perceptions of Judaism as well as Jewish self-understanding was part of the impetus for a purely historical approach to Judaism that either rationalized Jewish theology or pushed it to the margins.”<sup>27</sup> In an environment in which theology was under attack more broadly, on its way out in favor of the more “modern” religious studies, generations of Jewish scholars worried Jewish theology would diminish its credibility. They also often shared their non-Jewish colleagues’ reservations about the merits and rigor of theology as a discipline.<sup>28</sup> Jewish studies developed similar methodologies to religious studies, drawing on tools from anthropology, sociology, and history, adopting “Jewish thought” as a supposedly neutral scientific term, something that would not carry the baggage of “theology.”

Narrow definitions of “theology” were often propounded by Christians that necessarily excluded Judaism from the discourse. A variety of these narrow approaches include: the idea that theology is a “Greek” enterprise focused especially on speculative thinking about the nature and inner life of God that proceeds in a systematic philosophical style.<sup>29</sup> Judaism certainly has “God-talk,” but only a fraction of it is about the nature of God.

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<sup>25</sup> Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840) wrote about this challenging situation in his book *A Guide for the Perplexed of our Time*. See Jay Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 277. The use of *aggadah* to embarrass rabbinic Jews in the medieval period is referenced by Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 10-11. He supports this with evidence from the writings of Ibn Kammunah in thirteenth-century Baghdad, who defended Judaism from Karaite criticism, and from the Barcelona Disputation of 1263 in which Nahmanides was forced to publicly defend Judaism against Christian attack. Both downplayed the role of *aggadah* as anything other than homiletical, downplaying its relevance to Judaism.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 13 and 232. Fisher offers as examples Ephraim Urbach’s introduction to the *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). See also David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> David Kraemer, “Concerning the Theological Assumptions of the Yerushalmi,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Schafer (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 355,

The various genres of *aggada* are not easily recognized as philosophy because the thinking is not organized by systematic or dogmatic concerns, appearing most frequently as commentary.<sup>30</sup> It is certainly the case that we find philosophical questions answered in rabbinic literature but the material on particular topics is spread out, often quite brief, and does not easily appear coherent.<sup>31</sup> And the idea that theology is merely “theo-logos,” thinking about God in God’s self, and does not include also reflection on the divine-human relationship and how God’s revealed truth structures our understanding of ourselves and our world, narrows theology in an arbitrary way.<sup>32</sup>

Another potential narrowing of the term defines theology as dogma and argues that Judaism is distinctive from Christianity for asserting an orthopraxy and eschewing orthodoxy.<sup>33</sup> The claim is that theology is a normative discourse and as such is essentially

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argues that rabbinic literature does not do “theology in a classical sense” because rabbinic literature does not take up what he calls a Greek cultural form. He does say that the rabbis participate in “God-talk” directly and indirectly speak of God, but he eschews the label theology. For a broad overview of Jewish reservations to theology and the discipline’s continued relevance see David Ford, “Theology,” 61-79. See Fisher’s summary for additional reasons for naming theology as not authentically Jewish in *Contemplative Nation*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 6-7, discusses the lack of systemic concern in rabbinic writing on theological topics but also notes that this same lack of concern appears in the way the rabbis engage *halakha*. But no one argues that searches for meta-halakhic principles is a non-Jewish mode of scholarship. See also Walter Wurzburger, “Meta-Halakhic Propositions,” in *The Leo Jung Jubilee volume: Essays in His Honor on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Menahem M. Kasher, Norman Lamm, and Leonard Rosenfeld (New York: Jewish Center, 1962), 211-221.

<sup>31</sup> A number of anthologies of Jewish thought on various topics were created in the twentieth century to aid in reading rabbinic sources topically. These include Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909) and Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975).

<sup>32</sup> David Novak, “What is Jewish Theology?,” 23, affirms Jewish theology as including the exploration of “what God tells (*logos*) us humans *about* ourselves” through Torah. Theology he says treats “God’s word” (*devar Adonai*) as a logic of its own, given to us to disclose truth about ourselves and our world. Novak’s understanding centers the exploration of Torah as a source of true knowledge at the heart of Jewish theology. My own approach to theology shares this same conviction.

<sup>33</sup> For a defense of a non-dogmatic Judaism see: Leo Baeck, “Does Traditional Judaism Possess Dogmas?” in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 41-53; Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999); Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (London: Littman Library, 2004), 116-118; and Marc Shapiro, “Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles: The Last Word in Jewish Theology?” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993): 187-242, 204. For an orthodox critique of this position directed at the work of Shapiro see Gil Student, “Crossroads: Where Theology Meets Halacha. A Review

dogmatic.<sup>34</sup> It, therefore, cannot be a Jewish enterprise. Jews became quite fond of this idea in the early twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> Heschel gives voice to this bias against theology at the start of his book *God in Search of Man*, in which he defines theology as dogma and therefore often too quick to think that it has all the answers to ultimate questions.<sup>36</sup> According to his characterization it is “descriptive, normative, and historical” in its essence, not interested in exploring the act of believing but only the content of believing.<sup>37</sup> Heschel will pivot and call what he is doing “depth theology,” thus expanding what Jews think theology can be, but his opening description of theology captures a Jewish bias against theological inquiry.<sup>38</sup> Following the influential apologetics of Moses Mendelssohn in 1783 it became popular to claim that Judaism is only “revealed legislation,” not revealed truth, thus allowing for complete intellectual freedom.<sup>39</sup> Leo Baeck popularized this idea in his apologetic response to Adolf von Harnack’s *Das Wesen des Christenthums*. In *The Essence of Judaism*, Baeck argues that Judaism has no dogma, no fixed creed, stressing instead human conduct, correct deed, not correct belief.<sup>40</sup> He argues that this is what sets Judaism apart from other religions of the world, especially Christianity. This remains a popular claim. It is often cited with

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Essay,” *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 3 (Oct. 2003): 272-295 in which he argues, “Judaism is a faith in which certain beliefs are obligatory and binding” (276) and fundamental beliefs can be set by halakhic authorities (278).

<sup>34</sup> For an overview of tensions in the academy over what is theology and tensions with the field of religious studies see David Ford, “Theology,” 93-110.

<sup>35</sup> See Schechter’s account of the ubiquity of commitment to the assumption of Judaism’s dogmalessness in 1888 taught in British pulpits and in popular books on Judaism. He argues vociferously against what he describes as a misunderstanding responsible for creating great confusion and leading to the capture of Judaism by whatever ideas were fashionable at any given moment. He laments this overly flexible Judaism characterizing it as progressing so far that it is possible to now “classify Judaism among the invertebrate species.... It claims to be socialism for the adherents of Karl Marx and Lassalle, worship of man for the followers of Comte and St. Simon; it carefully avoids the word “God” for the comfort of agnostics and sceptics...” (50). See Solomon Schechter, “The Dogmas of Judaism,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 1, no. 1 (1888): 48-61.

<sup>36</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, trans. A. Arkush (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 97.

<sup>40</sup> Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism*, trans. Grubenwisse and Pearl (London: Macmillan & Co., 1936), 59ff and 261ff.

pride by Jews who have internalized critiques of other religions which do not allow freedom of inquiry and opinion because they demand allegiance to unjustifiable truth claims. Theology laboring under this critique is assumed to be essentially alien to Judaism.

Solomon Schechter, Franz Rosenzweig, and David Novak offer arguments against this “great dogma of dogmaless-ness.”<sup>41</sup> Rosenzweig critiqued Leo Baeck’s apologetics, citing the Jewish prayer book as implying a set of propositions a Jew is normatively required to affirm by *halakha*.<sup>42</sup> Schechter had offered his own account of fundamental Jewish concepts in 1888. He argued “... if there is anything sure, it is that the highest motives which worked through the history of Judaism are the strong belief in God and the unshaken confidence that at last this God, the God of Israel, will be the God of the whole world; or, in other words, Faith and Hope are the two most prominent characteristics of Judaism.”<sup>43</sup> Trained in history, Schechter grounds theological reflection in broad categories which he believes he goes on to show are evident in every historical manifestation of Judaism. David Novak adds to this, arguing that the *halakhic* system, which sets normative behavior, assumes certain truths, suggesting that “dogmas are a subset of *Halakhah*.”<sup>44</sup> He agrees that the central object of communal norms is in the realm of action, leaving a lot of scope for personal insight, but he also names that the denial or affirmation of ideas which undermine the normative practice of the community are the source for a normative boundary on Jewish theology.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> David Novak, “The Role of Dogma in Judaism,” *Theology Today* 45, no. 1 (1988): 49-61, quoting from Solomon Schechter, “The Dogmas of Judaism,” 108. For Novak’s response to this common assumption see his own systematic theological reflections on pages 147-81 in the same volume.

<sup>42</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1937), 31, cited in Novak, “The Role of Dogma in Judaism,” 49.

<sup>43</sup> Schechter, “The Dogmas of Judaism,” 152.

<sup>44</sup> Novak, “The Role of Dogma in Judaism,” 50.

<sup>45</sup> In Novak’s words “Judaism has norms and those norms have a structure called *Halakhah*. It admits and encourages theological speculation and the intellectual freedom it needs to thrive. Although this speculation is more than *Halakhah*, it is never to be less than it. Thus, if a speculative theological statement either directly denies an halakhically constituted dogma of Judaism, or undergirds a rejection of distortion of *Halakhah* in part or wholly, then it has been thereby falsified. Hence,

There are other ways in which Christian discourse has offered narrow understandings of theology which also limit its applicability to Judaism. Congar, in his historical survey, describes a progressive narrowing of *theologia* in early Christianity to mean reflection on teachings about Christ. Once theology had only Christian doctrines of God as its narrow focus, Eusebius of Caesarea could describe reflection about non-Christian gods as “false theology.”<sup>46</sup> From this kind of ancient Christian perspective, Jewish theology is ambiguous. Jews don’t do pagan “false theology,” but they also don’t do theology with any reference to Christ or to the Trinity, Athanasius’ definition of the discipline.<sup>47</sup> A Jew might look at this conversation as affirmation that theology is only a Christian exercise. The problem with this affirmation is that it seems as if Jews are affirming that discourse about God and the divine-human relationship is itself foreign to Judaism. That can’t be true since God is implied in Jewish practices and texts.

In *Contemplative Nation*, Cass Fisher offers an account of Jewish theology as reflection that is grounded in religious practices.<sup>48</sup> He argues theology has a central role in holding together a “Jewish religious worldview and its way of life.”<sup>49</sup> Jewish theology functions in three ways: as theoretical, formative, and reflective. As theory it justifies a Jewish way of life.<sup>50</sup> As an act of formation it guides the practitioner toward that which is

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regarding any theology, one might say that *Halakhah* is a necessary but not *the* sufficient condition for its validity in traditional Judaism.” “The Role of Dogma,” 61.

<sup>46</sup> Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, (New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1968), 31.

<sup>47</sup> David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 4.

<sup>48</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 222.

<sup>49</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 225.

<sup>50</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 78. David Novak, in his recent article “What is Jewish Theology?,” 21-22, defines his task as to “theologize in a way that by no means makes *halakhah* secondary to something more foundational in Judaism.” He argues that the best way to show theology is authentic to Judaism is to show that *halakha* needs theology “for its own integrity” and theology needs *halakha* “to give it normative force.” Novak’s emphasis falls under Fisher’s first function for theology as reflection that justifies a Jewish way of life. This style of doing theology shares something in common with John Millbank’s description of theology as kind of sociology. John Millbank, “The Other City: Theology as a Social Science,” in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 2006), 383. All Christian theology he argues, should see itself as “the explication of a socio-

ultimately true.<sup>51</sup> As a reflective exercise, theology itself is a spiritual practice helping to foster the theologian's relationship with God.<sup>52</sup> In its theoretical aspect theology has an apologetic side that addresses the hypothetical outsider and helps the insider remain committed. But theology is also a pedagogical discourse, a way a community can testify to what it loves and what it does.

The Jewish theology of liturgical asceticism investigates the way of life, in particular the prayer life, of normative Jewish practice with an interest in understanding its formative role. This project makes more explicit the force of practice on the individual and it orients the practitioner toward the divine-human relationship. A method for reflecting on how prayer implies a "social-imaginary" or a "habitus" serves all three of Fisher's functions. As a theoretical discourse it could be used for apologetics, to buttress the value of this form of prayer as a spiritual practice. As a formative and reflective discourse this Jewish liturgical asceticism will have pedagogical value and impact a practitioner's self-understanding.

As should be clear from this brief treatment of the impoverished state of Jewish theology in the academy and contemporary Judaism, comparative theology has an important role to play in the formation of Jewish theologians. As a discipline, it opens up the opportunity for Jews to study Christianity for the purpose of enriching Judaism's self-understanding.<sup>53</sup> Comparative theologians learn how to enter, as best as possible, the self-

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linguistic practice, or as the constant re-narration of this practice as it has historically developed. The task of such theology is not apologetic, nor even simply argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian mythos, pronounce again the Christian logos, and call again for Christian praxis in a manner that restores their freshness and originality." Millbank expresses a definition of Christian theology similar to Fisher and Novak's emphasis on theology as reflection on practice. Theology, Fisher and Novak suggest, is authentic to Judaism if it is understood as a way of speaking within the Jewish mythos using the logic of the tradition to reflect on Jewish practice in fresh, original, and compelling ways.

<sup>51</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 78.

<sup>52</sup> Fisher, *Contemplative Nation*, 79. Fisher contrast this emphasis on the divine-human relationship with systematic reflection on salvific knowledge. The first he sees as the proper orientation of Jewish theology, the later a way of thinking about theology's goals that is overly defined by Christianity.

<sup>53</sup> Catherine Cornille describes the goal of comparative theology as "comparison ... for the purpose of enriching and enhancing the self-understanding of a particular religion, or particular truth more

understanding of another tradition and from that place learn to see their own anew.<sup>54</sup>

Through rigorous historical training in the internal diversity and development of another tradition, comparative theologians become equipped to reflect on what they learned from the other in constructive ways for the good of their home traditions and communities.<sup>55</sup>

Using Christian thinkers to define a conversational space for a project in Jewish theology is not without some irony. Christian dominance of the field impacts the way arguments must be framed, the general inclinations of subdisciplines, and the kind of inquiry considered interesting, among other things. The rare Jewish theologian has often been obliged to spend a lot of time and effort correcting Christian misrepresentations of Judaism. When Louis Jacobs began a short introduction to Judaism and the body in a book edited by Sarah Coakley in 1997, he understood that his work would need to address a Christian audience. While others who wrote within that collection could address Christian concerns about the body directly, Jacobs had to frame his work by the needs of the Christian world, not the Jewish one. Thus, he began with a description of common Christian mischaracterizations of Judaism's relationship to the body.<sup>56</sup> His essay is a good example of how Jewish scholarship in theology is framed by centuries of Christian total dominance of this academic discipline. While abandoning academic theology is not the way forward from my perspective, I can see the appeal of Jewish Studies departments where Jewish thought can be less encumbered by a need to explain itself to Christian conversation partners.

Despite the challenge of Christian dominance within the field of theology, Comparative Theology functions differently. The respect for difference cultivated by the

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broadly conceived." Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 10.

<sup>54</sup> See Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1-23 for a further introduction to the discipline of Comparative Theology.

<sup>55</sup> Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 14 and 18.

<sup>56</sup> Louis Jacobs, "The body in Jewish worship: three rituals examined," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 71-89.

method of inquiry and most especially the emphasis on scholars writing for the unique needs of their home traditions, allows for Jewish theological inquiry where the concerns of Judaism are allowed to be at the forefront of scholarly concern. Comparative theology then allows Jews to engage Christian theology as a resource without being hemmed in by that audience's needs.

Christian theology models a confident, rigorous, and robust constructive theological discourse which Jewish theologians could beneficially learn to model.<sup>57</sup> Jews share with Christians common challenges to religious flourishing shaped by our shared context. The theological norms of Christianity do not have to be my own to learn from how Christians respond to those challenges. David Novak recently affirmed the need for Jewish theologians to borrow “a method of articulation from the surrounding world.”<sup>58</sup> This dissertation is a direct development of reflecting on liturgical prayer with Christian theologians who introduced me to a way of recovering asceticism for the contemporary moment.<sup>59</sup> The context of comparative theological expectations that I contribute to the needs of my own

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<sup>57</sup> The sense that Jewish theology can and should speak not just to Jews but also to the academy and to the public is a confident posture not often adopted by Jewish theologians. David Tracy, “A Social Portrait of the Theologian,” in *The Analogical Imagination*, 3-46. Some notable exceptions include the success of two self-help books with some Jewish theology included that became American best sellers: Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) and Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, *Peace of Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946) a work of popular psychology with a veneer of theology. For a discussion of this book's influence on the American context see Andrew Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 195-217.

<sup>58</sup> Novak, “What is Jewish Theology?,” 37, commends methods in philosophical phenomenology or in political philosophy, depending on the object of study.

<sup>59</sup> I have done my best to faithfully understand the Christian theologians on their own terms, but it is always the case that objectivity will be forever elusive. Thus, naming my own situated vantage point as a Jewish theologian is important for understanding where any possible distortions of their thought may be coming from. See Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing the Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 202-213. The challenge and inevitable impossibility of ever fully seeing from outside one's own tradition is examined by Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

community made possible a project in which I was invited to evaluate and adapt Christian approaches to suit a Jewish discourse and Jewish communal needs.<sup>60</sup>

### 1.1.1 Assimilation and Recovery

There are a number of different types of learning done by comparative theologians. Catherine Cornille has recently described five central modes of constructive learning she has seen in confessional comparative theology.<sup>61</sup> This dissertation is most closely an expression of assimilation and recovery. At first, I hesitated to describe this project as assimilation because the categories assimilated were not Christian symbols, texts, ritual elements, philosophical ideas, or experiences.<sup>62</sup> But it became clear to me that I was appropriating methods of theology itself, in so far as the method for reflecting on practice I develop is modeled on the work of Christian scholars. As I hope I've already shown, theology is not properly a non-Jewish mode of reflection, but it lags behind other reflective modes in Judaism. To help it grow up quickly, Jewish theology can learn from and adapt Christian modes of reflection where appropriate, assimilating to Jewish theology a more mature and developed discussion than may have happened without the Christian influence.

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<sup>60</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), 3, describes the tendency to do shallow work as a danger for the theologian because they are so often generalists without the limitations that discipline specific training requires. Part of what commended the comparative theology approach is my concern that my work avoids merely trendy engagement with popular ideologies. Attempting to do theology as a young scholar from "the deep end," as Sarah Coakley describes it in "Deepening Practices," in *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 107, requires modeling my work on that of more mature theologians. By spending time in their methods of liturgical and ascetic reflection I learned methods for thinking about practice that grew out of their own mature reflection and practice.

<sup>61</sup> Recovery is one of five types of learning Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, Chapter 4, describes as common in confessional comparative theology. The others are: intensification, rectification, reinterpretation, and appropriation.

<sup>62</sup> These are some of the kinds of elements that Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 134, mentions as examples.

Because there has been such a long history of Jews living as minorities among Christian majorities, there will be some Jewish scholars who balk at the very posture of humility necessary for learning from the Christian other. For some there is a natural desire to revel in the reality that the study of Judaism can now take place on its own terms, without having to use categories or methods the Christian majority understands or approves of. This is a natural response, but I contend it does not serve Judaism well. The future of Judaism is bound up with the wider world. Avoiding appropriation of other's ways of understanding faith and speaking that faith to our shared cultural context will only hurt Judaism's ability to explain itself in plausible ways to contemporary Jews.

Another form of comparative learning happening in this dissertation is called by Cornille "recovery." Recovery is the act of rediscovering marginalized or forgotten teachers and ideas in one's own tradition because of engagement with another. Cornille quotes Daniel Sheridan, a Christian comparative theologian, who describes his relationship to certain Hindu teachings as a "catalyst" to "grasp afresh our own tradition and to make it our own in a way adequate to the demands and challenges of the modern culture that we live in."<sup>63</sup> This dissertation does something similar. I argue that we can grasp normative liturgical prayer in a fresh way by understanding its desire forming capacity and through this come to a deeper appreciation for the act of prayer and its role in supporting an overarching vision of flourishing Jewish life for contemporary Jews. Just as James K. A. Smith linked the thinking of Augustine with the continental philosophical tradition, I knew this project needed an internal Jewish voice that could help explain desire in traditional terms. Smith's approach inspired me to recover the theological anthropology of Rabbi Israel Salanter. Salanter helped me find a powerful description of how desire operates and what

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<sup>63</sup> Daniel Sheridan, *Loving God: Kṛṣṇa and Christ: A Christian Commentary on the Nārada Sūtras* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 6-7, quoted by Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 125.

methods can effectively assist us in channeling it in life-giving ways. Sheridan describes this kind of comparative learning as “part of a global religious *ressourcement* and re-foundation” of religions in our contemporary world.<sup>64</sup> The recovery of Salanter’s thinking and practice from one hundred sixty years ago to address a current need should commend the value of recovery more broadly. An act of humility and creativity together, recovery reminds us that to heal the ills we face in our own time, there is both wisdom to inherit and the need for fresh reflection and application.

## 1.2 SITUATING THIS PROJECT WITHIN JEWISH LITURGICAL STUDIES

In Ruth Langer’s recent bibliography of the field, she summarizes the scope of the current study of Jewish liturgy. The world of Jewish liturgical studies is small and most of its contributors employ non-theological methodologies.<sup>65</sup> Much of its scholarship is historical in approach, functioning primarily as a subset of the study of rabbinic Judaism and the Second Temple period.<sup>66</sup> The field began in the nineteenth century with studies of the

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel Sheridan, *Loving God*, 8, quoted by Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 125.

<sup>65</sup> Richard S. Sarason summarized the field in 1981 as predominately made up of “philological-historical” and “form critical” approaches. “The Modern Study of Jewish Liturgy” in *The Study of Ancient Judaism I: Mishnah, Midrash, Siddur*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York: Ktav, 1981), pp. 107-179. Cf. Eli Kaunfer, following Peter Lehnardt, “*Mehkar Ve-Hora’ah Be-Veit Sefer Ha-Gavohah (Hochschule) Le-Madai Ha-Yahadut Be-Berlin: Heker Ha-Liturgiyah Ha-Yehudit Ke-Mikre Mivhan*,” in *Mi-Breslau Le-Yerushalayim*, ed. Guy Miron (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2009), 100-116, esp. 108-109, suggests a threefold scheme for organizing the major approaches to the modern academic study of liturgy: philology, form-criticism, and holism. In his dissertation, *Interpreting Jewish Liturgy: The Literary-Intertextual Method* (PhD Dissertation, The Jewish Theological Seminary, 2014), Kaunfer created a methodology for offering new interpretations of liturgical texts based on juxtaposing prayer texts with biblical and rabbinic intertexts.

<sup>66</sup> See Ruth Langer, *Jewish Liturgy: A Guide to Research* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1. She helpfully summarizes the process of adoption of rabbinic norms in Jewish prayer in her introduction as well as an overview of some of the most important trends in Jewish liturgical scholarship. See pages 11-12.

origins and development of the liturgy.<sup>67</sup> There have been only limited contributions that one might describe as theological. A number of these are studies of particular themes within the liturgy like the Messiah,<sup>68</sup> the Kingdom of God,<sup>69</sup> God's power,<sup>70</sup> God's memory,<sup>71</sup> or how the non-Jewish other is presented in prayer texts.<sup>72</sup> Kimelman has taken a decidedly theological approach to liturgy, studying the text of the liturgy with a keen literary eye mixed with historical tools and arguing for the normativity of central ideas of sovereignty and messianic redemption that he finds there.<sup>73</sup> He mostly uses tools of historical and textual analysis and pays limited attention to the significance of liturgy as an activity.<sup>74</sup> Other projects include analysis of prayer in the thought of theologians like the medieval

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<sup>67</sup> L. Zunz, *Die gottesdienstliche Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt* [The Historical Development of Jewish Sermons,] (Berlin: A. Asher, 1832; Hebrew ed. *Haderashot Biyisrael Behishtalshelutan*, with expanded notes by Hanokh Albeck, Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954).

<sup>68</sup> Reuven Kimelman, "The Messiah of the Amidah: A Study in Comparative Messianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no.2 (1997): 313-20.

<sup>69</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, "The Day of the Lord: Aspirations for the Kingdom of God in the Bible and Jewish Liturgy," in *Normative and Sectarian Judaism in the Second Temple Period* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 68-89.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Zank, "The Rabbinic Epithet Gevurah," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, New Series, Vol. 14, ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 83-169.

<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Hoffman, "Does God Remember? A Liturgical Theology of Memory," in *Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism*, ed. Michael Signer (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 41-72.

<sup>72</sup> Ruth Langer, "Theologies of Self and Other in American Jewish Liturgies," *CCAR Journal* (Winter 2005): 3-41.

<sup>73</sup> Reuven Kimelman, "The Daily Amidah and the Rhetoric of Redemption," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79, nos. 2-3 (1989): 165-97; "The Literary Structure of the Amidah and the Rhetoric of Redemption," in *The Echoes of Many Texts: Reflection on Jewish and Christian Traditions, Essays in Honor of Lou H. Silbermann*, ed. William G. Dever and J. Edward Wright (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 171-218; "The Shema and Its Blessings: The Realization of God's Kingship," in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee Levine (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987), 73-86; "The Shema' and its Rhetoric: The Case for the Shema' Being More than Creation, Revelation, and Redemption," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (1993): 111-156; "The Shema' Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation," *Kenishta* 1 (2001): 9-105; "The Theology of the Daily Liturgy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven Kepnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 77-102.

<sup>74</sup> He does hang the normativity of the theological ideas of the liturgy on the fact of its communal performance. He describes the theology in the liturgy as "consensual theology." Reuven Kimelman, "The Theology of the Daily Liturgy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 77.

rationalist Maimonides,<sup>75</sup> the modern mystic Rav Abraham Isaac Kook,<sup>76</sup> or the phenomenological theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel.<sup>77</sup> These studies predominately analyze what others have said, leaving the application of their thinking to the reader. They are a form of historical theology, not constructive theology.

The theological contributions of the twentieth-century Abraham Joshua Heschel and Joseph Soloveitchik offer their respective philosophies of prayer with emphasis on descriptions of the prayer experience and with some attention to the formation of the worshiper.<sup>78</sup> Their works are some of the most profound contemporary reflections in English on liturgical prayer as formative of a way of being in the world. In a number of places, I appeal to Heschel's insights to clarify or corroborate the work I'm doing in this dissertation. But both men wrote about prayer in relationship to their larger concerns with articulating Jewish theologies for the modern age. Their studies of prayer are not methodologically reflective, nor do they constitute conscious contributions to an academic field for the study of liturgy.

Lawrence Hoffman shares my interest in attending to the people praying along with the act of prayer. He argues for a method of study that moves "from the texts to the people."<sup>79</sup> His approach has been called holism.<sup>80</sup> His emphasis is on the study of prayer as

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<sup>75</sup> See Langer, *Jewish Liturgy*, 234-235 for a complete list of the publications in English on Maimonides at the time of publication.

<sup>76</sup> Samuel Hugo Bergman, "On Prayer," in *Essays on the Thought and Philosophy of Rabbi Kook*, ed. Ezra Gellman (New York: Cornwall Books, 1991), 69-74.

<sup>77</sup> Alfredo Fabio Borodowski wrote an important study of the Hasidic influences on Heschel's thought in "Hasidic Sources in Heschel's Conceptions of Prayer," *Conservative Judaism* 50, nos. 2-3 (Spring 1998): 36-47. Jack Cohen offers a survey of arguments for the legitimacy of prayer offered by twentieth century Jewish philosophers in *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

<sup>78</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Scribner, 1954); Joseph Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart: Essay on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York: Toras HoRov Foundation, Ktav, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Lehnardt, "Mehkar Ve-Hora'ah ... 100-116, especially 108-109.

“not a literary matter” but rather as an activity of people. He explores what liturgy discloses about the symbolic system of people who pray. In his book *Beyond the Text* he uses methodologies from anthropology, sociology, and ritual studies to describe how liturgy constructs concepts like time, space, and identity.<sup>81</sup> In his book, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*, he draws analogies between prayer and theater, suggesting that prayer services can draw on the ways that art helps people enter an alternative reality.<sup>82</sup> His thinking is at times insightful about how communal prayer spaces could be more effective. He suggests reforms to prayer spaces, music, participation of the laity, but all explicitly without engaging theological language. He argues theology will obscure and make it hard for people to speak dispassionately about the shortcomings of their services.<sup>83</sup> I contend that translating our reflection on prayer out of theological language secularizes the activity by evaluating it using secular values and goals. Analogies to the theater and the “suspension of disbelief” that happens there make us more self-aware of being formed by prayer, but using a secular discourse will cause people to be less likely to embrace the plausibility of the social-imaginary built through prayer. While Hoffman and I share an object of study, the activity of the people in prayer, the difference between a secular and a theological methodology profoundly changes the scholarship.

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<sup>81</sup> See *Beyond the Text*, but also see Lawrence Hoffman, “Reconstructing Ritual as Identity and Culture,” in *The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship*, eds. Paul Bradshaw and Lawrence Hoffman (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 22-41. Cf. Emma O’Donnell, *Remembering the Future: The Experience of Time in Jewish and Christian Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), Chapter 5.

<sup>82</sup> Lawrence Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only* (Washington D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1988), 131-152.

<sup>83</sup> Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer*, 110-117. I confess to being unconvinced by his claim that we need to abandon theological language to be able to understand the shortcomings of communal prayer services. I find it especially difficult because he claims to agree that the goal of prayer and the criteria for evaluating prayer must be determined by tradition specific discourse (111). Is he suggesting that prayer can be helpfully crafted without reference to the tradition specific goals or tradition specific criteria for evaluating prayer?

The scholarship on prayer to which this project is most similar is that of Steven Kepnes who approaches the liturgy as communal action formative of distinct modes of reasoning. He describes liturgy as creating “a sphere in which thinking about primary existential, metaphysical, and theological issues occurs.”<sup>84</sup> He argues that the activity of liturgical prayer is itself a “normative philosophical enterprise.” By this he means an activity that gives rise to questions about the good and the true, and he believes liturgy helps philosophy overcome some of its dichotomies like “belief and behavior, thought and action, mind and body.”<sup>85</sup> He describes the final chapter of his book as a contribution to liturgical theology with a semiotic reading of the morning service.<sup>86</sup> In it he explains the way that liturgical prayer carries meaningful signs in both the words of the prayer book and the actions of praying people, with an eye to the modes of reasoning and the intellectual socialization at play.<sup>87</sup> There is some affinity between this and my own interest in the formative power of the liturgy, but the mechanisms by which we understand it operating and the object of formation are very different. Kepnes wants to talk about liturgy’s power on our reason; I am curious about the way it shapes our loves, a question that no Jewish theologians have addressed. To answer this question, I turn to the work of a number of Christian theologians writing about liturgy as a constructive force on desire. I examine their methods and use them to create a Jewish account of liturgical prayer as an ascetic practice.

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<sup>84</sup> Steven Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>85</sup> Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning*, 21. Kepnes never defines what he means by liturgical theology and engages with no Christian liturgical theologians in his book.

<sup>87</sup> Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning*, 179.

### 1.3 CHRISTIAN LITURGICAL THEOLOGY AND ITS ASSUMPTIONS

The field of Christian liturgical theology has an expansive way of thinking about liturgy as both the work of the people collectively in service of God and the work of God in communicating divine revelation to the people.<sup>88</sup> Thus, liturgical theology as a method approaches liturgy not merely as the study of texts collected in a book that the church happens to use at a particular moment as its prayer book.<sup>89</sup> Christian liturgical theology thinks about liturgy as constitutive of what Christians do as Christians, and of what the Church is. Liturgy is a verb, the activity of the people of God.<sup>90</sup> Liturgy in Greek, *leitourgia*, means “public service.” Liturgical theology is focused on the public aspect of prayer. Liturgy is not personal prayer, nor is it personal devotional exercises.<sup>91</sup>

Dom Lambert Beauduin’s influential description of liturgy as “the church at prayer”<sup>92</sup> suggests a number of important elements that remain central to Christian liturgical theology’s understanding of both liturgy and theology. Liturgy is a skill set of the

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<sup>88</sup> The first sense of liturgy, the work of the people, is what the word means in its classical sense, a work done on behalf of the whole people, a public service. The second sense, the work of God, or the revelatory aspect is its intellectual content, how God sees us and the world. It is also formative in the ascetic sense, going beyond the merely intellectual, because it is a moment of encounter with God. See Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?*, 9, 11.

<sup>89</sup> My approach to the study of liturgy is not bothered by the historical claim that contingency and power dynamics have played a role in the selection of liturgical texts, because I am interested in describing what is at stake when the community prays together the words that they currently pray. I am describing the formation of their heart (ascetic) and mind (theology). The current words of the traditional liturgy, no matter how they came to be there, are a way that a people hear from God, are formed by God, and offer their service to God. For more insight into the contingency and power dynamics that went into the formation of Christian liturgy see Maxwell E. Johnson, *Praying and Believing in Early Christianity: The Interplay between Christian Worship and Doctrine* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013). There is as yet no similar study of Jewish liturgy.

<sup>90</sup> David W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>91</sup> In this definition I am depending on Joris Geldhof’s introduction to liturgical theology in which he links this approach to liturgy with the nineteenth-century Liturgical Movement which advocated for the full active participation of the whole church in the sacraments and the liturgy of the hours. See Joris Geldhof, “Liturgical Theology” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias on Religion*, 2 March 2015. Accessed online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.14>.

<sup>92</sup> Joris Geldhof, “Liturgical Theology,” 2.

people; they are the experts. Aiden Kavanagh summarizes the egalitarian and communitarian aspects of the liturgical theological method in this way:

A liturgical act is proletarian in the sense that it is not done by academic elites; it is communitarian in the sense that it is not undertaken by the scholar alone in his [sic] study; and it is quotidian in the sense that it is not accomplished occasionally but regularly throughout the daily, weekly, and yearly round of the assembly's life of public liturgical worship.<sup>93</sup>

Kavanagh elevates the person who participates regularly in the praying community as the true liturgist. Liturgical theology centers the praying person in community as the expert and their liturgical life of prayer as the second-order object of reflection by the scholar.<sup>94</sup>

Alexander Schmemmann, a major influence on Kavanagh and the godfather of this method asserts that it is a theological discipline. "[L]iturgical theology... is not about liturgy but about theology, i.e. about the faith of the Church as expressed, communicated and preserved by the liturgy."<sup>95</sup> The theology of the Church is found in the liturgy, but not in some complete way. The claim is that the liturgy is normative for theology, but not that it is the source of all theology. To properly approach the work of liturgical theology, one must not use the liturgy to investigate theories of worship, nor merely study the history of liturgy in general. A rigorous liturgical theology is informed by an understanding of how liturgical rites developed through time, comparisons of different versions of prayer texts or prayer placement, the methodologies of philological analysis, or insights based in social, psychological, and philosophical understandings of people but it continues to investigate beyond the scope of these methods. It seeks to understand the creation of the Church intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and morally by the liturgy. David Fagerberg, a

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<sup>93</sup> Aiden Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), 89.

<sup>94</sup> The post-liberal emphasis on the saint as the person best placed to innovate within a tradition and to evaluate innovation expresses a parallel egalitarian ethos, offering a similar primacy to the practitioner. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 36.

<sup>95</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform," *St. Vladimir's Quarterly* 13, no. 4, (1969): 217-224, 128, quoted by Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 74.

Catholic liturgical theologian carrying on the work of the Schmemmann-Kavanagh school<sup>96</sup> summarizes the approach in this way: “Liturgy is not an expression of how people see things; rather it proposes, instead, how God sees all people. Liturgy in its thin sense is an expression of how we see God; liturgy in its thick sense is an expression of how God sees us.”<sup>97</sup> The liturgy becomes an act of encounter with the transformative power of divine revelation.

Fagerberg saw in the method of liturgical theology an implicit formative component; therefore, it cannot be done by people who are not implicated by the practice. In his book, *Liturgical Asceticism*, he makes this explicit. Fagerberg writes:

You can’t taste your tongue. Why not? Because it is the organ by which you taste other things. You can’t celebrate liturgy. Why not? Because it is the organ by which we celebrate the Kingdom of God. Liturgical time, then, is only partially understood by an anthropological study of human festival, because festival is how the eighth day is celebrated. Liturgical space, then, is not first a history of architecture, it is the nine square yards in front of the burning bush. Liturgical assembly, then, is only partially understood by sociology, for it is the body of Christ.<sup>98</sup>

Just as the tongue cannot be tasted and can only do the tasting, the liturgical life of Christians cannot be fully understood abstracted from the living of it. When we try to think about Christian liturgical life using the tools of architecture or sociology or ritual studies or anthropology, we are trying to taste our tongue instead of tasting the life of the body of Christ through the liturgy. The liturgical theologian might use tools learned from ritual

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<sup>96</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, ix, describes himself as part of the “Schmemmann-Kavanagh school of liturgical theology” because he shares with them the “supposition ... that liturgy is primary theology, and that the *lex orandi* of the Church establishes her *lex credendi*.” Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 101, relates that Aidan Kavanaugh led him in an independent study in everything written by Alexander Schmemmann in Fagerberg’s first year of study at Yale Divinity School. It was during this time that Kavanaugh was preparing the lectures that would become his book, *On Liturgical Theology*. Kavanaugh, a southern Baptist convert to Catholicism shares a similar methodology to that of the Russian Orthodox theologian Schmemmann. Michelle Gilgannon, in her dissertation, “The Liturgical Theology of Aidan Kavanaugh, OSB: Synthesis and Critique” (Ph.D diss., Duquesne University, 2011), 52, retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/581>, describes Fagerberg as a “disciple” of Schmemmann and Kavanaugh’s similar methods for the study of liturgy.

<sup>97</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 9.

<sup>98</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 203.

studies, history, or anthropology, but there must always be an understanding that liturgical theology isn't any one of these disciplines; it is theology and as such it cannot be done by spectators. My approach to constructing a Jewish liturgical asceticism builds on this commitment to liturgy as theology while also adapting the definition of liturgy in ways that reflect the Jewish liturgical life of the community.<sup>99</sup>

Dom Lambert's definition, "the church at prayer," is not a definition I can use to define liturgy as a Jewish theologian. I will need a parallel definition that allows for the expression of the particular elements of Jewish liturgical prayer. Perhaps all that is needed is to substitute Jewish people for church, generating a definition of Jewish liturgy as "the activity of Jews at prayer"? There is an element of this that works. The definition helpfully picks out the object of reflection as not personal prayer, nor private prayer, and not merely a book of prayers but an ongoing activity of the Jewish community. But this definition is missing something crucial. The church is a multivalent term pointing to the people, the institution, and the building all at the same moment. Judaism has distinct words for these various functions. Thus changing the definition to "the synagogue at prayer" also makes very little sense from a Jewish perspective. Fagerberg can meaningfully say "the liturgy exists in order to constitute Church, which is the epiphany of the kingdom.... The church expresses and fulfills herself in this act."<sup>100</sup> The synagogue, while a useful building for the fulfillment of one aspect of the Jewish people's service to God, is irrelevant to a Jewish eschatological vision of the kingdom; in fact, the prayers prayed there and the existence of the space as a place of prayer is an activity for the exile, not the "epiphany of the

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<sup>99</sup> David Novak shares my assumption that Jewish theology implicates the person doing the reflection. He describes "looking at theology" as the work of a spectator. One might characterize some historical theology in this way. But participation in the ongoing Jewish tradition can only be done by theologians who accept it as a normative enterprise and recognize the task as explicating faithfully Judaism's truth. David Novak, "What is Jewish Theology?," 20.

<sup>100</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?*, 94.

kingdom.”<sup>101</sup> It also cannot be used to describe the people who come there to pray. So what Jewish language can define liturgy in a way that is inclusive of the approach offered by these liturgical theologians?

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is with a closer look at a more fundamental difference between the church and the Jewish people. The Jewish people are not constituted by prayer. Membership in the Jewish people is not dependent on testimony and practice, even if identity is profoundly formed in that way. It is possible to join the Jewish people through testimony and commitment to practice, but the primary means of entry is not testimony but birth. Jewishness is bodily conferred by a mother to her child.<sup>102</sup> The person born a Jew has an intrinsic connection to a family and the Torah revelation that bestows their mission.<sup>103</sup> Converts are included within this body of faith through an analogy to rebirth.<sup>104</sup>

Liturgical life is a central expression of God’s people acting out their purpose as God’s servants, but it is only one among many. Other practices of moral and ritual life as well as the centrally important practice of Torah study, itself a form of worship, all work

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<sup>101</sup> Ruth Langer points out that rabbinic liturgy becomes understood as equivalent to the worship of God done in the Temple. The rabbinic prayers substitute for the form of worship lost to a community in exile. Many of the prayers are topically about the hope for an end to exile, making the prayers themselves only relevant when in exile. To the extent that synagogue functions as a replacement for Temple worship, it is a compromise, not the ideal. For a fuller treatment of these themes see Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), Chapter 1. See also Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997).

<sup>102</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), xviii.

<sup>103</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barabara E. Galli (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 364, first published in 1921, argues that this is something fundamentally different about Jews and Christians. The Christian lacks intrinsic connection to community; Christianity is a collection of individuals who become community. This would make sense of why, for Fagerberg, liturgical asceticism has a central role in constituting the Church, but in Judaism it does not.

<sup>104</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, xviii.

together to form the "horizons" of Jewish life.<sup>105</sup> A Jewish liturgical asceticism will have to speak about Jewish liturgy within the context of the numerous opportunities to practice *mitzvot*, of which prayer is one.<sup>106</sup> The ascetic quality of liturgical prayer may function in unique ways, but it is not the only expression of disciplined labor (*askein*) with desire forming influence.<sup>107</sup>

A Jewish definition of liturgy depends on describing prayer in Jewish terms. *Tefila* is defined as "the service of the heart"<sup>108</sup> where heart is more than the seat of feeling, implying also the seat of reflection and discernment.<sup>109</sup> *Tefila* picks out both spontaneous and fixed prescribed structured prayers. The structured quality of *tefila* is called *keva*. *Keva* prayer is not spontaneous prayer.<sup>110</sup> Spontaneous prayer is in response to an experience, an occasion

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<sup>105</sup> Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah*, 190-192. Andrew Massena offers an introduction for a Christian audience to the centrally important Jewish practice of Torah study. The whole introduction is beneficial but see especially *Torah for Its Own Sake: The Decalogue in Rabbinic and Patristic Exegesis* (PhD diss., Boston College, 2020), 17-18, 36.

<sup>106</sup> In her essay "Prayer and Worship," in *Modern Judaism*, ed. Nicholas de Lange and Miri Freud-Kandel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 231, Ruth Langer notices the different role of prayer within Jewish life from that of Christian Europe in the nineteenth century. The Christian world maintained a stronger difference between the sacred and the secular realms of life, seeing the sacred as what is done in church. In contrast Judaism sees all of life as an appropriate location for the sacred, making prayer in synagogue less privileged as a sacred activity.

<sup>107</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 19-20, points out that asceticism in Greek comes from the word *askein* meaning "to work." *Askesis* came to mean exercise, discipline and training for a purpose. Fagerberg distinguishes different kinds of asceticism from one another through what caused the training and what its goals are. There is patriotic asceticism, showing solidarity with your group against another by refraining from consuming certain goods. There is moral asceticism, when a person disciplines her manner and quantity of consumption for the sake of distributive justice. There is athletic asceticism, when a person trains his body for the sake of winning a prize. All these forms of asceticism are a kind of disciplined labor for a goal.

<sup>108</sup> B. *Taanit* 2a, *Sifrei Devarim* 41.

<sup>109</sup> Randy Rashkover, "Introduction: The Future of the Word and the Liturgical Turn," in *Liturgy, Time and the Politics of Redemption*, ed. Randi Rashkover and C. C. Pecknold (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 10.

<sup>110</sup> Joseph Heineman argues in "The Fixed and the Fluid in Jewish Prayer," in *Prayer in Judaism: Continuity and Change*, ed. Gabriel H. Cohn and Harold Fisch (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996; Hebrew 1973), 45-52, that the fixed form of prayer as an official divine service equivalent to sacrificial worship is a particular Jewish invention. His claim is under sourced and not undisputed, however it does support the idea that Jewish prayer has progressively come to take on a more fixed obligatory textual form, as found in today's prayer books, in contrast to a spontaneous and personal wording. The article builds on his 1964 dissertation book, known in English as *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns*, trans. Richard S. Sarason (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977).

where a person reaches out to God in need or in praise. In contrast, the prompt to pray this *tefilat keva* comes about in response to God's will that a person should pray.<sup>111</sup> *Tefilat keva* is prayer done in a structured and ordered way at set times as a divine service.<sup>112</sup> The structure does not preclude sincerity or reflection or personal engagement with prayers. In fact, the structure creates the context for the reflection.

The kind of *keva* prayer I am talking about is not prayer by people who resist participation in the story of ultimate concern embedded in the liturgy. *Tefilat keva* is not an act of saying prayers whose premises one actively rejects. It is also not the occasional engagement with liturgical prayer for nontheological reasons. *Tefilat keva* is not prayer done for the sake of the rabbi or cantor or for an audience or for a parent or grandparent. By *keva* prayer, I mean prayer as a structured commitment, a daily practice with set times and set words, done even when one does not feel like it. *Tefilat keva* is recited regularly and often, sometimes with deep emotion and sometimes not, sometimes incorporating spontaneity, sometimes not. Losing sight of the spiritual meaning of the act, because a person is still half asleep while putting on *tefillin*, for example, does not destroy the formative power of the act on our desires. *Tefilat keva* is an act that carries an implicit understanding because of the kind of activity that it is and the kind of creatures we are.<sup>113</sup>

It is certainly the case that active reflection during prayer can deepen the impact of the practice, but my claim is that *tefilat keva* forms our loves even without cerebral

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<sup>111</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Schribner's, 1954), 97, describes a moment when he was walking in Berlin to an intellectual event, and he noticed the sun setting. He realized it was time to say Shema and he had to make a choice, to participate in the spiritual way of being of the Jewish people, or to continue to the lecture. He chose to pray and at that moment he felt his Jewishness, his calling. By responding to his duty to worship, he became more fully his Jewish self. In reflecting on that moment, he wrote, "I am not always in a mood to pray. I do not always have the vision and the strength to say a word in the presence of God. But when I am weak, it is the law that gives me strength; when my vision is dim, it is duty that gives me insight."

<sup>112</sup> Eliezer Berkowitz, *Studies in Torah Judaism: Prayer*, ed. Leon D. Stintskin (New York: Yeshiva University Press and Ktav, 1969), 119.

<sup>113</sup> I elaborate on this claim in chapters four and five.

reflection on the “meaning” of *tefilot*.<sup>114</sup> In the most pared-back interpretation of what it means to require *kavvanah*, the Sages describe the necessity of doing an action because God commanded it.<sup>115</sup> This may be true because of the kind of activity that liturgical prayer is.<sup>116</sup> As long as a person is not short-circuiting the activity by thinking about what nonsense these prayers are or feeling self-conscious about what grandma is thinking of her right now, this kind of formation is operative. One of the core points of this paper is that the *keva* practice of *tefila* is ascetic whether we are aware of it or not.<sup>117</sup> The physical and imaginative activity of *tefilat keva* operates on our desire, *ta'avah*, in ways that are more complex than we can account for through reflection.

Thus, it is best to define Jewish liturgy as follows: Jewish prayer is a *mitzvah*, an act that incarnates God’s will.<sup>118</sup> Habitual, committed participation in the normative and ordered service inherited from the past is an act of *tefilat keva*. It is done ideally with a reflective spirit, an attentive mind, an open heart. But *tefilat keva* carries within itself an implicit social-imaginary that shapes our loves without active reflection.<sup>119</sup> A Jewish liturgical asceticism examines *tefilat keva* for its role as a training ground of desire in the service of a vision of Jewish “ends.”

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<sup>114</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 166-167.

<sup>115</sup> M. *Berakhot* 2.1; B. *Berakhot* 13a; Joseph Karo, *Shulhan Arukh* Orach Hayyim 60.4. For a discussion of this claim and its importance for Jewish theology see David Novak, “What Is Jewish Theology?,” 23.

<sup>116</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 166.

<sup>117</sup> In this I share James K. A. Smith’s understanding of liturgical prayer. He discusses this issue in *Desiring the Kingdom*, 166-167.

<sup>118</sup> The Jewish legal system, *halakha*, has been the vehicle for the transmission of the boundaries of acceptable prayer practice since the codification of the Mishnah. These boundaries express God’s will, and they leave space for customs (*minhagim*) to still develop within different communities of practice. *Minhag* is considered both something to defer to, reflecting its sacred quality, and something slightly more contingent than the boundaries of *halakha*. For a through treatment of the relationship between *halakha* and *minhag* in liturgical practice see Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly*.

<sup>119</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 165, argues that worship should be understood as action rather than reflection. His liturgical project is not about what liturgical life means, but instead about the formation of our loves taking place as we act liturgically.

This definition of Jewish liturgy shares a number of key elements with that of the Christian liturgical theologians, but it is reframed to reflect the unique way the Jewish people are constituted and the role of prayer within their wider calling to keep God's commandments. It maintains a similar focus on the public, inherited, and structured quality of liturgy as a practice and does not conflict with the egalitarian, communitarian, and quotidian elements of liturgical theology summarized by Kavanagh. It is also a definition that is just as rooted within Jewish discourse about prayer as the definitions offered by the Christian liturgical theologians above. Rather than offer a more generic definition, I have tried to offer an equally rooted definition of liturgy on which to build an authentic Jewish liturgical asceticism.

#### **1.4 JUDAISM DOES ASCETICISM?**

This project is about creating a method to understand the ascetic power of *tefilat keva*. So far, I've described the theological nature of the dissertation, grappling with the marginal place of theology in Judaism today and explaining how comparative theology helps to mitigate that reality. I've also situated this project within Christian liturgical theology and Jewish studies of liturgy. Finally, I have explained what I mean by the specific Jewish terminology I am using for liturgy, namely *tefilat keva*. I will conclude this chapter by explaining what I mean by asceticism and situate my definition within the scholarship on Judaism and asceticism. I do a longer analysis of the ascetic within western intellectual history and explain in detail the way of thinking about asceticism I am using in this project in chapter two.

My approach to asceticism is modeled on the thinking of the Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley. She has begun to call for the creation of a “new asceticism.”<sup>120</sup> By asceticism she means the formation of Christians through “a demanding integration of intellectual, spiritual and bodily practice over a life-time sustained by a complete vision of the Christian life and its ‘ends’.”<sup>121</sup> This definition commended itself to me as a model for a number of reasons. It is inclusive of a variety of practices beyond just physical abstinence.<sup>122</sup> It avoids pitting asceticism against human wellbeing. As a contrast consider Richard Finn’s definition which suggests asceticism is a kind of pathology leading to the destruction of human flourishing. “Asceticism may be defined as the voluntary abstention for philosophical or religious reasons from physical goods that are central to the well-being of humankind.”<sup>123</sup> Coakley’s definition refocuses asceticism on its role as a path to the attainment of ideals, a holistic vision for all aspects of life.<sup>124</sup> Her definition also shows that she is not unaware of the human tendency to want quick results. She pushes back against the potential for the application of ascetic practices in harsh ways by talking about formation bearing fruit over a

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<sup>120</sup> See her collection of articles *The New Asceticism*.

<sup>121</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 18.

<sup>122</sup> In Jewish language I would describe this vision of asceticism as inclusive of both *mitzvot aseh* and *mitzvot lo ta’ase*, positive and negative commandments. For an introduction to these terms and their role in contemporary discussions of the role of women in congregational prayer see Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women’s Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), chapter 1; Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Women’s Voice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 221-231; Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>123</sup> Richard Finn, “Asceticism,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-01110.xml>.

<sup>124</sup> There are a number of ideals toward which ascetic life could be understood to be directed. Edith Wyschogrod, “The Howl of Oedipus, the Cry of Heloise: From Asceticism to Postmodern Ethics,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16-32, places the root of asceticism in ethical formation suggesting that ethics cannot function without personal formation, and asceticism is how the west has traditionally talked about personal formation. Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in the same volume, 3-13, describes asceticism as a path to freedom from the appetites through practices of simple living. He distinguishes between natural and unnatural asceticism by describing unnatural asceticism as evidencing mortification of the body born out of a hatred for God’s creation. This is a heretical form of asceticism. Natural asceticism is a path of moderate struggle for the liberation of the body to attain spiritual ends.

lifetime. Hers is an understanding of asceticism as a way of life. Her thinking upends a number of assumptions about asceticism made over the last century and a half.

In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, most scholars regularly concluded that Judaism was not ascetic.<sup>125</sup> Much like the debate over theology, a lot depended on what was meant by asceticism and whether or not asceticism was respected by the scholar or by the wider culture. I will describe that climate in much more detail in the next chapter, but, in short, a central reason for claiming Judaism does not do asceticism was the climate of critiques against this element of Christianity for being life-denying. Asceticism was presented as the central culprit of this life-denying ideology. If Judaism could be presented as not ascetic, it could avoid being attacked as a religion that corrupted society and led to people abandoning this-worldly success and delight for the sake of some future life. Eliezer Diamond, in his study of asceticism in rabbinic practices of Torah study and fasting, describes the situation of early scholarship in this way:

The assumption that Judaism is non- or anti-ascetic has often served as the handmaiden of a theological agenda.... For Jews viewing asceticism as a physically and spiritually injurious practice contrary to human nature, its purported absence in Judaism has been evidence of spiritual health – and of the superiority of Judaism’s worldliness to the “pathological” ascetic withdrawal of Christianity.<sup>126</sup>

Jewish scholars rejecting asceticism often took the definition offered by its critics, looked at Judaism, and honestly said, “We do not see this kind of behavior as part of normative religious life.” Some also joined the critique of Christianity and argued that Judaism is a better religion because it is not ascetic.<sup>127</sup> But Diamond adds another layer to the dynamics around the study of asceticism:

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<sup>125</sup> For an excellent historical analysis of the history of scholarship on asceticism see Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-20. Much of what follows is a summary of Diamond’s analysis.

<sup>126</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 7-8.

<sup>127</sup> Urbach, *The Sages*, 447-448, sees Judaism as better than Christianity precisely because it eschews asceticism. See also Abba Hillel Silver, *Where Judaism Differed* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1957), 182-223 and Kaufmann Kohler and Emil Hirsch, “Asceticism,” in *The Jewish*

For Christians, on the other hand, Christianity's rejection of the flesh in favor of the spirit has been a sign of the transcendent superiority of the new Israel. Even those Christian scholars who acknowledged the presence of asceticism within Judaism often see it as an imperfect precursor of Christianity's more fully developed spirituality.<sup>128</sup>

Christians, participating in an ancient polemic between Christianity and Judaism over the "spirit" vs. the "flesh," presented ascetic commitments as a sign of Christianity's superior spirituality.

It was not just the agendas of scholars that impacted their thinking on Judaism and asceticism, but also their varying definitions of asceticism. While early twentieth-century scholars of Judaism often eschewed asceticism, by the mid-twentieth century we see differing approaches. For example, the debate between Yitzhak Baer and E. E. Urbach in the latter part of the 1950's shows shifting attitudes to asceticism among Jewish scholars, exemplified by Baer, who claims Judaism is ascetic.<sup>129</sup> Diamond casts their debate as mostly over how they each define asceticism.<sup>130</sup> Baer describes asceticism as "moral striving" expressed in "self-education, character development, service to God, and boundless generosity toward others."<sup>131</sup> He saw all these expressed in Second Temple and rabbinic literature. Urbach describes asceticism as "dualism, mortification of the flesh, and the

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*Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer et. al (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906). Some Christian scholars also perpetuated an understanding of the anti-ascetic quality of Judaism for their own reasons, often having to do with their bias toward Judaism as "fleshly" in comparison to Christianity's higher spiritual religious expression. For example, Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and D. Martindale (New York: Free Press, 1952; German publication 1917), 254, 343, 401-410; Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. E. Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963; original, 1920), 246; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 263-266.

<sup>128</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 8.

<sup>129</sup> Their debate took place in Hebrew. Yitzhak Baer, *Yisrael ba'Amim* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1955), 38-57. Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, "Asceticism and Suffering in Rabbinic Thought" (Hebrew), in *Sefer Yovel le-Yitshaq Baer*, eds. S. Ettinger, S. Baron, B. Dinur and Y. Halperin (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 48-68. Cited by Diamond, *Holy Men*, 145-146, n12 and n34.

<sup>130</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 8-9.

<sup>131</sup> Baer, *Yisrael ba'Amim*, 40. Translated and cited by Diamond, *Holy Men*, 8.

creation of an elite class of ascetics.”<sup>132</sup> He argues there are none of these elements in rabbinic Judaism. Just defining the phenomenon is a source of conflict.

When Steven Fraade and Eliezer Diamond, both historians of rabbinics, take up asceticism in the late twentieth century, they both start by defining the phenomenon. I will outline both here and explain how my own definition compares and why it differs. In an essay published in 1988, Fraade defines asceticism as having two basic components: “(1) the exercise of disciplined effort toward the goal of spiritual perfection (however understood), which requires (2) abstention (whether total or partial, permanent or temporary, individualistic or communalistic) from the satisfaction of otherwise permitted earthly, creaturely desires.”<sup>133</sup> Fraade understands asceticism as aspirational, a way of being for the purpose of perfecting human life, i.e., it is directed toward a vision of human flourishing. It is expressed in limiting behavior that people participate in freely. By avoiding certain acts, ascetics believe they will better achieve their goal.

Diamond builds on and augments Fraade’s definition in his book about rabbinic asceticism published in 2004. Diamond concurs with Fraade’s approach but suggests ways to enhance his ideas to create greater clarity about the particular form of asceticism he sees expressed in rabbinic Judaism. Diamond offers three additional characteristics. Rabbinic asceticism is present in attitudes as much as it is in actions, one central attitude being the instrumentalization of this-worldly good, minimizing pleasure in this life for reward in another.<sup>134</sup> Rabbinic asceticism is expressed by creating intensive fellowships rather than by withdrawing from society.<sup>135</sup> Finally, Diamond suggests that Weber’s description of

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<sup>132</sup> Urbach, “*Sefer Yovel le-Yitshaq Baer*,” 67-68. Translated and cited by Diamond, *Holy Men*, 8.

<sup>133</sup> Steven Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 253-288, 257.

<sup>134</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Examples of this include the Second Temple-era communities of Essenes and Pharisees, the proto-rabbinic groups who ate apart from other Jews and described themselves as “*haverim*,” and, jumping to the modern period, the *musar* groups (*va’adot*) that Israel Salanter encouraged people to join

Puritan asceticism is analogous to rabbinic asceticism. Weber describes Puritan asceticism as expressed not as a retreat from the world but as an embrace of the mundane for the sake of its ultimate transformation as a person lives their physical existence in the light of God's will.<sup>136</sup> The main difference, he suggests, is that while Puritans believed they were called to work diligently at business, the rabbis practiced self-restraint in other areas of life for the sake of their vocation of Torah study and its rewards in the world to come.<sup>137</sup>

My understanding of asceticism differs from Fraade and Diamond's. I agree that there is an element of discipline, an ordering of one's life according to practices which form one toward a full vision of the ends of Jewish life. But the goal is a vision of the ends of Jewish life which are not merely captured in "spiritual perfection," nor merely captured by "the rewards of the world to come." I understand Judaism's vision for human flourishing includes attaining transcendent goods, as well as goods we experience in this life like justice, joy in God's service, intimacy with God, wholehearted living, and satisfaction. Both Fraade and Diamond demonstrate a bias toward asceticism as only for the sake of transcendent goods.<sup>138</sup>

They also see asceticism as only expressed through self-denial of appetitive goods. There is no space in their definitions for including as ascetic purposeful additions to life, like, for example, the structuring of one's days around a prayer practice. I do not dispute

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where there could be social reinforcement for the commitments and practices of the Musar movement. On the lifestyle of the Essenes and Pharisees see Shaye J. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, ed. Wayne Meeks (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 143-159. On the *havurot* of the early sages see, Jacob Neusner, "The Fellowship in the Second Jewish Commonwealth," *Harvard Theological Review* 53, no. 3 (1960), 125-142. For an introduction to the musar groups in a nineteenth-century yeshiva setting see Geoffrey Claussen, *Sharing the Burden: Rabbi Simhah Zissel Ziv and the Path of Musar* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 17-24.

<sup>136</sup> See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner's, 1958), 153-154 for a fuller description of Puritan asceticism. Cited in Diamond, *Holy Men*, 14.

<sup>137</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 15.

<sup>138</sup> Diamond suggests the ascetic attitude instrumentalizes food, sex and wealth, diminishing their enjoyment, for the sake of a greater spirituality. Diamond, *Holy Men*, 11.

that there is evidence of self-denial in rabbinic literature. Diamond finds evidence for withdrawal from the body's delights, restrictions around enjoyment of physical goods, and descriptions of neglect of economic and familial life.<sup>139</sup> My retrieval of asceticism does include self-restraint and the redirection of disordered desires, but my approach to asceticism is much more life-affirming, including the addition of a focus on positive actions to one's life and not merely on the formation of appetitive desire.

I also do not follow Diamond's claim that asceticism is as much an attitude as a set of actions. In his view, asceticism is fundamentally a life-denying attitude, directed toward maximizing otherworldly rewards. I disagree with asceticism as feeling. I am investigating the desire-forming power of acts, not attitudes. The liturgical asceticism that I craft in this project understands liturgy as an act that creates attitudes and forms desires.

Ascetic acts are not merely what a person refrains from, they are also what a person adds to their life. In building a Jewish understanding of asceticism, I have included in my understanding of ascetic actions the fulfilling of positive commandments like giving generously, visiting the sick, hospitality, prayer, and Torah study. These activities all have desire forming qualities, they enhance our desire to continue to do God's will in other areas of our life.<sup>140</sup> The path to properly directed desire is through a wholistic commitment to spiritual, embodied, and intellectual practices, some of which will require self-restraint to accomplish, but it is just as much about adding formative actions that train our hearts to love what is most worthy of love. In the case of this project, the exploration will focus on

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<sup>139</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 11.

<sup>140</sup> Ben Azzai is said to have taught, "The performance of a commandment (*mitzvah*) leads to performing another (*mitzvah*), and transgression leads to more transgression. The reward for performing a commandment (*mitzvah*) is another commandment (*mitzvah*)..." (Mishnah *Pirke Avot* 4:2). I hear this teaching as suggesting what I'm claiming here. The life of *mitzvot* is transformational of our desires, causing a person to desire to do more *mitzvot*. The life of performing God's commandments carries the reward of coming to love doing them even more.

prayer as an ascetic act, but my approach to asceticism could be applied to other normative Jewish practices as exercises in desire formation.<sup>141</sup>

One might argue that by describing all of Jewish life as ascetic I am making the definition meaningless. Diamond expresses concern over losing the meaningfulness of asceticism if it is identified with religious discipline in general. He suggests asceticism must be defined as the voluntary acceptance of limitations on actions which, by avoiding, set one apart from the activity of “the larger community of believers.”<sup>142</sup> My understanding of asceticism does not violate this rule. Diamond is thinking about particular practices of the rabbinic elite that may have later become more widely adopted by rabbinic Jews. In their early stages, though, they were noticeably different from the behavior of other Jews. In our contemporary moment, we live in a context where it is most common for American Jewish lifestyles to not conform to traditional normative Jewish behavior.<sup>143</sup> American Jews act increasingly like their fellow Americans. For most Jews, a commitment to regular daily prayer is a distinctive behavior from other American Jews and from their fellow Americans with whom they share a lot in common. To think about Jewish prayer as an ascetic activity of a minority makes sense for our current context in which the act is actually rare in comparison with one’s fellow Americans.<sup>144</sup>

In the twenty-first century, we live in a popular culture which still regurgitates anti-asceticism tropes and looks with suspicion on communities of practice. As Wimbush and Valantasis note in their introduction to a 1995 compendium of scholarly essays on

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<sup>141</sup> The dynamics for how other practices shape desire will be different but I think the example I offer here could prove a fruitful direction for reflecting on other practices.

<sup>142</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 10.

<sup>143</sup> For a recent sociological analysis of American Jewish religious practice see Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice their Religion Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>144</sup> Diamond, *Holy Men*, 11, does admit that there is an inherently ascetic temperament to Judaism because of the general restrictions that traditional Judaism places on sex and diet. This shows that he recognizes the meaningfulness of thinking about Judaism in light of non-Jewish life as well.

asceticism, “We are left ... with a legacy of academic and popular culture-specific biases and prejudices regarding the origins, essence and value of asceticism ....”<sup>145</sup> At the same time, we see an explosion of rechanneled ascetic energy expressed within contemporary life toward fitness regimes, diet control, health retreats, and a re-norming of sexual mores around self-control and consent culture.<sup>146</sup> While western anti-religion tropes are still often tinged with critiques of religious asceticism, we see energy for the ascetic in “a-religious” and even “anti-religious” cultural movements. Alongside this bubbling up of secular ascetic habits we also see increased attention given to embodied practices by feminists and post-modern philosophers.<sup>147</sup>

In light of all this, one might argue that asceticism has been with us throughout the last century, just in another guise. Wimbush and Valantasis suggest that the modern and secular discipline of ethics has usurped the conversation about personal formation previously partly within the purview of asceticism. They write:

The root of asceticism remains ethical formation and ethics cannot function without addressing personal formation. By severing ethics from its ascetical roots, postmodern society loses its memory about personal and corporate development, finds itself incapable of molding people who live ethically, and remains paralyzed in addressing questions of violence, hatred, bigotry, and abuse.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Wimbush and Valantasis, “Introduction,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxv.

<sup>146</sup> Sarah Coakley in “Introduction,” in *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 15-25, discusses the irony of our culture banishing asceticism and at the same time becoming obsessed with questions of bodiliness.

<sup>147</sup> Foucault and Pierre Hadot changed our understanding of classical philosophy, arguing philosophy was a holistic way of being that included physical practices and habits, inextricable to the formation of intellectual virtues. See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther Martin, et al. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); and Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Examples of feminist engagement with the formation of the female self through practice can be found in Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). For an introduction to academic feminism’s contributions to the broader corporeal turn see Alexandra Howson, *Embodying Gender* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 44-72.

<sup>148</sup> Wimbush and Valantasis, “Introduction,” xxix.

One could argue that asceticism never really fell out of fashion. Instead, the vitriol unleashed at the ascetic by a Western intellectual elite was less a renunciation of personal formation and more an attempt to wrest control of the goals of formation away from religious institutions. Asceticism was superseded by ethics in an analogous way that psychologists have replacing clergy. This pivoting of trust from religious authorities toward the new intellectual elite was by no means a necessary development but rather the result of many trends.<sup>149</sup> Retrieving a conversation about ascetic formation through a regular and committed life of liturgical prayer could be understood as accessing suppressed wisdom in human formation. Under this approach the new asceticism is a retrieval of sources for a conversation our society is already having whether or not theologians participate.

## 1.5 SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

The loss of asceticism is the loss of traditional wisdom about what our lives are aimed at, impoverishing our contemporary conversations about quality of life and the conditions of human happiness. In setting out to find a way of talking about *tefilat keva* as a desire forming practice, I embark on a recovery project. That recovery project was inspired by my study of Christian theologians who model what a recovery of ascetic insight could offer our contemporary context.

In the following chapter of this dissertation, Chapter Two, I study more deeply the recent debates over asceticism in western intellectual life and present reasons why we would benefit from its recovery. I also introduce, with the help of Charles Taylor, a standard

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<sup>149</sup> Charles Taylor gives a wide-ranging account in *A Secular Age*.

by which we can evaluate any recovery of ascetic discourse. I then apply his standard, “the maximal demand,”<sup>150</sup> to Coakley’s recovered asceticism. I use it to test her definition of asceticism, before taking up her definition as model for my own description of a Jewish asceticism. I demonstrate why Coakley’s work is a helpful example of how to recover asceticism wisely, and her definition of ascetic life helps focus attention on the way ascetic formation is connected to a vision for human flourishing.

Because the practice under considering in this dissertation is liturgy, and Coakley does not take up liturgical practice in her analysis of Christian ascetic activities, I look at two other Christian theologians in Chapter Three who write more specifically about liturgy as a desire forming act. Through the work of James Fagerberg, I introduce Catholic liturgical theology and its subdiscipline, liturgical asceticism. After retrieving a set of methodological principles for a theological analysis of liturgy from Fagerberg, I examine his approach to asceticism in light of Charles Taylor’s “maximal demand.” I show how Fagerberg’s definitions of the discipline proves useful but his approach to exegeting liturgical practice does not suit my needs. In the last half of the chapter, I offer an analysis of the “Cultural Liturgies Project” of the Presbyterian James K. A. Smith. In Smith’s approach I find an example of a method for explaining how liturgy operates at a pre-conscious level on desire. Smith based his argument on a philosophical account of the social construction of the self through embodied habitual practices, blended with the theological anthropology he drew from St. Augustine. After summarizing his argument, I pull together Taylor, Coakley, Fagerberg, and Smith’s contributions into one model for thinking about liturgy as an ascetic act. This synthesis becomes the model I use to build a Jewish liturgical asceticism in Chapters Three and Four.

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<sup>150</sup> Charles Taylor, *Secular Age*, 640-641.

In Chapter Four, I recover the teachings of the founder of the Musar movement, R. Israel Salanter (1810-1883) to help articulate a traditionally rooted theological anthropology. Salanter's thinking appealed to me for this project because he was committed to avoiding esoteric speculation, making his teachings more understandable to lay people. His sense of mission for the assimilated and Jewishly undereducated meant that his thinking has a democratic ethos, in keeping with the democratizing approach of liturgical theology. But most especially, his thinking is valuable because he gave an account of desire as pre-cognitive, developed a practice for forming it, and articulated a vision for desire formation as critical for accomplishing the ends of a Jewish life. His ways of thinking about desire as a pre-cognitive force shares some central similarities with Smith's approach.

Salanter provides for this project both a description of the "ends" of Jewish life well lived and an understanding of how desire is formed in light of a Jewish understanding of the human condition. To help the reader understand Salanter's thought and significance I begin the chapter by giving a historical account of Salanter's life and influence on the Musar movement. I then explain his theological anthropology, especially focusing on his unique way of talking about desire, *ta'avah*, as a pre-cognitive element of the self and central to his theory of human action. Salanter identified *ta'avah*, a pre-cognitive force, as a central stumbling block in attaining the telos of Jewish life. He developed a unique method, *hitpa'alut*, for rechanneling it toward delight in the service of God, leading to what he described as *shlemut*, wholeheartedness. I explain the practice of *hitpa'alut* and how it impacts *ta'avah* so that I can use these teachings along with Smith's contributions when I demonstrate the desire forming power of *tefilat keva* in chapter five.

Chapter Four ends with a description of a Jewish liturgical asceticism based on the recovery of Salanter's theological account of desire formation and the model of asceticism and liturgical theology I already gathered from Taylor, Coakley, Fagerberg, and Smith. I

argue that *tefilat keva* is a desire forming practice that forms *ta'avah* over the course of a lifetime through an encounter with a narrative of ultimate concern which stimulates the emotions and engages the body in the cultivation of wholeheartedness in God's service.

In Chapter Five I apply this claim to an exegesis of Jewish liturgical life. I start by demonstrating that Jewish liturgy has the elements of tacit desire formation that Smith and Salanter describe. I show that morning prayer (Shacharit) is an encounter with a Jewish narrative of ultimate concern that situates the person praying within a sacred history, between Sinai and the Kingdom of God. I demonstrate how the narrative implicates each person in a vision for how to joyfully and faithfully await redemption while also being formed in a way that prepares them to live wholeheartedly in the Kingdom. *Aleinu* discloses the importance of joy to wholehearted divine service both now and in the eschatological future, *taḥanun* centers purity of heart as a crucial exilic task, the *shema* discloses the centrality of love and loyalty to the good life and the taming of riotous desire as central to a Jewish vision of human flourishing, and the *amida* trains us to love what God loves. All these aspects of the liturgy do not fully communicate the great story of the Jewish people but instead work together to bring us to meditate on our Jewish mission and the vision for human flourishing it discloses. The emphasis in this part of the chapter is on uncovering the *ta'avah*-forming power of liturgy in embodied acts and narrative, illuminating the formation of the praying person's "background" taking place through the act. I spend time exegeting *tefilat keva's* formation of an exilic consciousness, situating our individual lives into the sacred story of the Jewish people and cultivating desire for the attendant mission and vision of the good life it conveys.

After concluding with a demonstration of exegeting *tefilat keva* for its narrative and embodied elements, I expand the analysis by including a look at several emotionally potent micronarratives that show up repeatedly in the morning liturgy. I explain how they function

in a similar way to *hitpa'alut* and then explicate their impact on our vision of the good life. I conclude the chapter with an account of what my exegesis of Jewish liturgy, through the lens of a liturgical asceticism, reveals about a Jewish account of what is worth living for.

Conceiving of liturgical prayer as an ascetic act can renew a deeper sense of purposefulness in the practice of *tefilat keva*. This project returns Jews to central human questions about the purpose of life and asks how the practices we have inherited help us attain those purposes. Much of American Judaism has been constructed on secular humanistic conceptions of self, flourishing, and our ethical predicament. By abandoning our theological anthropology and avoiding discussion of the ends of a Jewish life well lived, we trivialize Judaism. Jewish visions of human flourishing are regularly communicated as merely supportive of the agenda of the post-civil rights Democratic party.<sup>151</sup> Jewish questions are often thought of as narrow concerns about particular ritual questions. How often do I need to come to synagogue? What amount of Hebrew should we use in communal prayer? Who can Jews marry? Judaism is perceived as offering nothing unique for guiding a human life nor helping people managing the inevitable trials of existence. In an attempt at being unobjectionable, American Judaism became superficial and is now facing abandonment out of sheer boredom by the current generation.<sup>152</sup> This Jewish liturgical asceticism reveals Judaism as offering a unique vision for human wellbeing that may have some similarities with ascendant secular humanist aspirations but also some significant critiques of its often materialistic and power-hungry ends. An ascetic account of *tefilat keva*

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<sup>151</sup> Sarah Hurwitz certainly internalized this understanding of Judaism. She begins her book *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life In Judaism After Finally Choosing to Look There* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2019), xxviii, with a description of her own understanding of Jewishness before she began to study Judaism as an adult. She felt her Jewishness was adequately expressed in her work as a speech writer for Michelle Obama.

<sup>152</sup> Heschel says the decline of religion is “because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.” *God in Search of Man*, 3. Judaism must recover and teach the human questions to which it has wise answers. Sarah Hurwitz describes the experience of the high holidays for her as experiences of boredom. *Here All Along*, 124.

reveals Judaism's unique account of human flourishing present within Jewish practice and exposes *tefilat keva's* significance as an empowering and liberative act toward the attainment of God's true vision for our good.

## 2.0 FINDING A NEW ASCETICISM: COAKLEY AND SMITH IN CONVERSATION

To accomplish a new engagement with asceticism, I set out in this chapter to articulate a standard for evaluating ascetic teachings. My goal is to promote a “new” asceticism,<sup>1</sup> not just a recapitulation of old authorities, but an attempt to recover the ascetic with wisdom.<sup>2</sup> I begin with a few working definitions of asceticism. While giving the unfamiliar reader a starting point for the conversation, these will also highlight some contemporary biases about the subject. To lay the groundwork for our contemporary assumptions about asceticism I take the reader back to some of the early zealous critics of asceticism, explaining their central intellectual sources and noting where their arguments lack fairness and skew our perception of the topic. This chapter then looks again at asceticism with the help of Charles Taylor who offers reasons why the retrieval of ascetic discourse is a contemporary need, while naming the goods being sought by asceticism’s critics. From Taylor I draw out standards that mark out what ought to be “new” within this new asceticism and I also use his thinking to help argue for the timeliness of this

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<sup>1</sup> From Sarah Coakley’s book of the same name: *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). What is new is not only a turn away from the old negative bias against asceticism, but also a new kind of ascetic discourse and way of living shaped by religious practices of desire formation chastened by the century of critique.

<sup>2</sup> Mark James in his book, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origin, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation* (Boston: Brill, 2021), defines wisdom within exegetical traditions as both a mode of linguistic rationality and a skillfulness formed in the exegete through encounter with the language of scripture. “The wise interpreter must ... read in a way that puts her own rationality into play, proceeding from lexis to logos, from the words of the written text to the capacity for speaking wisely that they exemplify. This process involves forming four kinds of skills: the verbal skill for repeating the words of scripture, the performative skill for determining the appropriate contexts for using those words, the explicative skill for clarifying the function of those words, and the logical skill for describing and correcting the discursive capacities of readers” (246). To articulate a new asceticism requires this kind of exegetical capacity in reference to the retrieval of traditional texts and practices of asceticism. The new asceticism must be articulated by wise interpreters of these traditions who have both knowledge of the practices and the performative skill to contextualize them properly, explain their function, and correct their application by others.

conversation for our society. Finally, I introduce in this chapter the Christian theologian Sarah Coakley who recently offered a new definition of asceticism which I then show fulfills Taylor's standards for a new "chastened" ascetic discourse. This chapter begins with several definitions of asceticism and ends with a new wiser definition that will serve as my model for building a new Jewish engagement with asceticism in a contemporary register.

## 2.1 THE ASCETIC: WORKING DEFINITIONS

Offering a definition is, in some sense, part of what is at stake here.<sup>3</sup> How we choose to define asceticism will impact the judgements we bring to bear on it. But a reader deserves a working definition that can be nuanced going forward even while it is important not to exclude the reader from the complexity of offering a definition. An examination of a few different definitions available from a few disciplines should demonstrate the challenge of academic discourse about the ascetic. This will also expose some of the sensitivities which will be more deeply outlined in the history of the critique of asceticism that follows. The encyclopedia Britannica Academic offers an introduction to the word this way,

Asceticism, (from Greek *askeō*: "to exercise," or "to train"), the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal.... The origins of asceticism lie in man's attempts to achieve various ultimate goals or ideals: development of the "whole" person, human creativity, ideas, the "self," or skills demanding technical proficiency.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Part of the reason that Jewish scholars argue about whether or not Judaism has an authentic ascetic tradition is because of a lack of clarity over what is asceticism. Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8. Contemporary scholarship on asceticism often proceeds without a definition. Elizabeth Castelli, "Asceticism-Audience and Response," in Wimbush and Valantasis, *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 183, notes that her asceticism working group has been meeting for seven years without an agreement on a definition of asceticism.

<sup>4</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Asceticism," accessed October 11, 2021, <https://academic-eb-com.proxy.bc.edu/levels/collegiate/article/asceticism/9782>. The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity offers another similar description: "Asceticism (from Gk. askēsis, 'training'; cf. enkrateia, 'restraint') is the practice of physical, intellectual, or spiritual disciplines for the inculcation of philosophical or religious ideals." Columba Stewart, Nancy Khalek, and Nicholas Baker-Brian, "Asceticism," *The Oxford*

This definition offers a classical approach by starting with the Greek origins of the word and its connection to the idea of training, self-restraint, and exercise. Asceticism in this context suggests a kind of self-creation, the honing of a person with regular activity, or lack of activity, for the sake of some goal. For athletes, that goal could be excellence in a particular skill like a sport.<sup>5</sup> For the philosopher, it might be training the intellect for the sake of wisdom. For the sage, it might be ethical training and the training of the human will for the perfection of human action.<sup>6</sup> Asceticism picks out action or lack of action that is for the sake of broader goals or attainments that cannot be achieved without this training.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to a definition from the classical era, sociological studies of the ascetic emphasize what some modern scholarship of religion also focuses upon, the tension between the physical and spiritual. Their categorizations of asceticism often come from

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*Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662778.001.0001/acref-9780198662778-e-491>.

<sup>5</sup> In a theological context this idea of training the self is critical but it must include the formation of the self for transcendent ends. Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 216, writes, “The goal of the scripture traditions is defined by the tradition, and the ascetic self is constructed in a way particular to that tradition and the orientation towards a transcendent goal.” The goal is not temporally limited and so sports cannot be an ascetic discipline.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 7, analyses the creation of the Jewish sage in *The Writings of the Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, a highly significant collection of teachings of early rabbinic ethical literature. In his book, *The Making of the Sage* he argues that taken together, large portions of *Rabbi Nathan* “instruct a student to become a sage through chosen and cultivated relations of subordination to the sage and community, the tradition of Torah, and God, along with internalization of discourse connected with these three authorities.” In his book he offers a careful look at the ethical training that is involved in this subordination using the lens of virtue ethics and does some careful teasing out of the relationship of subordination and internalization in relationship to choice and creativity. His topics include desire formation, though he does not talk about the formation of desire in terms of asceticism. Eliezer Diamond, in *Holy Men and Hunger Artists*, 21-58, argues that within elite Rabbinic circles ascetic life was woven together with Torah study and a quest for holiness that is an enduring and authentic expression of Judaism.

<sup>7</sup> This definition of the ascetic, in a Jewish register, could be read to imply that practices are servile, important not in themselves, but merely as training for something else. This would be a problematic way of applying this definition to Jewish practice. I will elaborate on this concern in the following chapter in relationship to prayer as both for something else but also for its own sake. See page Chapter 3, page 122.

Christian inflected assumptions based on a rather negative read of monastic life. For example, in a recent *Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Science*, the author claims there are:

five universal traits [of asceticism]: fasting, sexual continence, poverty, seclusion, and self-inflicted pain. The body is regarded as being evil; thus, there is a fundamental and critical opposition between body and spirit. For Christians, asceticism is the denial of the body; it is a means to an end. The sole goal is to see God. In order to do this, one believes it necessary to ‘flee the world,’ to leave it as humanly possible without dying. The focus here is on early and medieval Christian asceticism and on the modern sociological study of it.<sup>8</sup>

In short, this author defines asceticism as an extreme negative relationship of the self to the body. This is in keeping with a “dualistic” way of thinking about religious practice as an attempt to flee the evils of the body.<sup>9</sup> In this entry, he uses the tools of sociology to define asceticism, problematically relying on analyses from early twentieth-century German Church historians whose work shows great disdain for pre-modern expressions of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Scholarship of that ilk casts a long shadow, particularly in the social sciences which were birthed in this era and whose leading scholars were influenced by the culture of German Protestantism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Adair-Toteff, “Asceticism,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. James D. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Elsevier, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.32007-4>, accessed July 20, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> T. C. Hall, “Asceticism (Introduction),” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner’s, 1910), 66, categorized asceticism as having two major forms based on its goals, the “dualistic” goal is freedom from the evil body, the other “disciplinary” form has as its goal the training of the body, will, or spirit.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see the work of Adolf Harnack, *Monasticism: Its Ideals and History and The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. E. Kellett and F. H. Marseille (Oxford: Williams and Norgate, 1901); and Karl Heussi, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1936).

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber’s four types of asceticism show this generally pro-protestant bias. See his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958); and his *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. E. Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). John Millbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Blackwell, 2006), 49-144, articulates a similar concern over the implicit bias of supposedly “neutral” social sciences which are in fact imagined ways of speaking about the political, the social, the economic, the artistic from within an equally imagined theory of “the secular.”

In contrast we can see a more nuanced and considerably less judgmental approach to asceticism in the work of the religion scholar Gavin Flood. In his comparative work, *The Ascetic Self*, Flood seeks to understand the legitimacy of ascetic paths by being attentive to the relationship between subjectivity and tradition and the transformation of desire. His comparative textual analysis of Christian, Buddhist and Hindu texts leads him to describe the ascetic as, “a voluntary self-limitation for the sake of transformation...The ascetic life is one of order and limitation within tradition in the service of a higher freedom.”<sup>12</sup> The order and limitation is found in the performance of the collective memory of a tradition. Flood argues that the transformational goals are different for different traditions and the paths to attainment are also different. The process of internalization, however, is shared from tradition to tradition. It is a process of voluntary conformity of the body to a tradition’s *habitus*, cultivating a unique kind of awareness through “a ritual construction and entextualization of the body.”<sup>13</sup> Practitioners follow a pattern of life offered by tradition that they make their own, while aiming toward transcendent goals that include but are not limited to the subversion of the will and the transformation of desire.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the preceding definition, Flood’s description of the religious ascetic life notes that this is a *voluntary* special relationship to tradition that includes both positive and negative action.<sup>15</sup> It includes the acceptance of a way of being, a wrapping up of the whole self, body and soul in a received pattern for the sake of a higher freedom. Flood

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<sup>12</sup> Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Flood, 119 and 214.

<sup>14</sup> Flood, 198.

<sup>15</sup> Including the positive actions as part of ascetic practice instead of just focusing on the negative pushes back against the way of defining asceticism as rooted in the denigration of the world. This is a definition we see used by Durkheim who claimed that the ascetic springs from the command to escape the world, making the focus of study in asceticism abstinence rather than on “acts of positive piety.” For Durkheim asceticism is a misalignment of the cult, “systematic asceticism ... is nothing more than the bloating of the negative cult...” which should be a preparation for the positive cult but can become imbalanced and take over. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A New Translation*, by Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 315-16.

concludes that the ascetic self is a craft, a wisdom, the creation of the self as a work of art through the “intensification of meaning subjectively appropriated” through the practice of traditional rituals.<sup>16</sup> It should not be treated as a modern medical condition, psychologized or pathologized, but instead it should be understood as an expression of a path of human flourishing through the imprinting of a sacred tradition.<sup>17</sup>

This description of ascetic life offers some scope for a contemporary re-engagement with asceticism. How might religious rituals maintained by contemporary communities of modern individuals find greater significance by bringing an ascetic lens to their activities? What are the transcendent goods to which a life of practice (a life of *mitzvot*) lead? What relationship does the practice of daily *mitzvot* have to the formation of desire or the transformation of the will? How might we live *mitzvot* differently were we having these conversations?

These elements— the enfleshing of tradition, the inclusion of the whole human being in the process, the ritual practices, the transcendent goals and the fashioning of desire such that the human will is transformed—are significant reasons for situating my own work within the discourse of the ascetic.<sup>18</sup> These are the nodes of analysis I want to bring to my study of liturgical prayer. They offer an interwoven set of ideas about the human relationship to tradition and transcendence that situates desire at the heart of selfhood and action. An ascetic approach to liturgical prayer invites us to reconceptualize the practice as central to the process of forming a particular kind of skillful person,<sup>19</sup> a person who

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<sup>16</sup> Flood, 226.

<sup>17</sup> Flood, 212 and 216.

<sup>18</sup> Flood, 216.

<sup>19</sup> In *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 36-37, George Lindbeck describes the person who has been formed by a tradition as a saint, as one who is able to function within the language and symbol set of a tradition, capable of intuitively discriminating between authentic and inauthentic expressions of a tradition, and is able to use its symbols and language to make sense of her own experiences.

embodies skills that are more than the ones sought by and rewarded by contemporary society.<sup>20</sup> But a recovery of an ascetic approach to contemporary religious practice ought to be done thoughtfully, with concern for ways in which an ascetic approach to religious practice can be corrupted and can cause real harm. There has not been a century of critique for no reason. Prejudice is not the only reason ascetic life has received critique. Asceticism can be corrupted by authoritarianism creating counterfeit expressions of religious life.<sup>21</sup> Any attempt to recover ascetic discourse for the contemporary moment ought to consider dynamics of academic prejudice and the corruption of ascetic life as reasons for why asceticism has been placed outside “respectable” discourse.

### **2.1.1 A Short History of Asceticism and its Foes**

Sustained critique of asceticism in the west began in the nineteenth century and has led to what is now a pervasive intellectual and popular prejudice against asceticism as fanatical, self-inflicted suffering and self-denial for the purpose of abandoning the world.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 304, describes our current context as one in which people of different religions often behave very similarly in their habits. Most people have the “same activities, professions, opinions, tastes, etc.” as their neighbors, be they Muslim, Hindu, or Presbyterian. We are much more conformist than we like to believe. Ironically, this is because we are so much like each other in the mundane aspects of life: where we shop, what we buy, where we go to school, how we make a living, what entertainment we consume, how we pattern our lives with work and vacation, how we travel, what we aspire to “have”, our shared assumptions about “success”, etc. It is the fact that we are so similar in these mundane ways that makes it more challenging to feel comfortable with our differences about ultimate reality.

<sup>21</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 25, calls some expressions of asceticism “counterfeit,” naming especially the “authoritarian religious asceticism gone wrong” captured in popular autobiographical writings like Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) and John Cornwell, *Seminary Boy: A Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 2006). She says these accounts should be instructive, cautionary tales, about the corruptibility of asceticism.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 254, summarizes popular assumptions about asceticism, writing that people assume it to be “an extreme, pathological pattern of self-abnegation and flight from the world in the face of a less than hospitable social and historical environment.” He cites Oscar Hardman, *The Ideals of Asceticism: An Essay in Comparative Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 14, who describes the popular idea of asceticism as

This predominant negative view is rooted in a number of influential proto-social scientific books, exemplified by Friedrich Nietzsche in his philosophical historical works, *On the Genealogy of Morals* or *Beyond Good and Evil* and by Karl Marx. In their works, these thinkers articulate sensibilities toward asceticism felt by “secular intellectuals” of their day. Nietzsche describes the virtues of poverty, humility, and chastity as the products of asceticism.<sup>23</sup> He casts these supposed “virtues” as essentially corrupting because to acquire them, a person must decide to renounce earthly pleasures and power attained through physical embodied strength. He concludes that they are the products of life-denying value structures<sup>24</sup> that exist for the good of those who wanted to grab power away from the physically powerful, for the philosophers and theologians who created an alternative morality that they could master so as to acquire power for themselves.<sup>25</sup> In Marx’s

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denoting “self-inflicted suffering of marked severity or even a blind cult of pain... *The Oxford English Dictionary* recognizes this by defining asceticism as ‘rigorous self-discipline, severe abstinence, austerity,’ terms which plainly require that, whatever the prompting and purpose of the discipline, it may not be held to constitute asceticism unless it is characterized by severity.”

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche tells a story that links these charity, humility, and chastity to the very inception of Christianity. These qualities, rather than being laudable, are understood by him to have infected Christianity. According to him, these are the virtues of the weak, a “slave morality” promoted within the social classes in the Roman world within which Christianity is born. They are virtues that he claims are promoted by the “mentally or bodily inferior” as revenge against the strong. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, “A Genealogy of Morals,” *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche vol. 10*, ed. Alexander Tille, trans. William Hausmann (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), 188.

<sup>24</sup> “...the thought, round which the struggle turns, is the *valuation* of our life as pronounced by the ascetic priest.... life is regarded as a bridge leading to that other existence. The ascetic treats life as a wrong way which man had best retrace to the point whence it starts; or as an error which can be, should be disproved by our deeds.” Nietzsche, “A Genealogy of Morals,” 160.

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche accuses the “ascetic priest” of promoting the ascetic virtues not for their own sake but rather for the sake of attaining power. “For an ascetic life is a self-contradiction. Here a most extraordinary resentment prevails, —the resentment of an insatiate instinct and will to power, which would fain lord it—not merely over something in life but over life itself.... Here an attempt is made to use power for the purpose of stopping the sources of power.... satisfaction is felt and sought in all abortive, degenerate growth, in pain in mishap, in ugliness, in voluntary detraction, in self-mortification, in self-castigation, in self-sacrificing.” Nietzsche, “A Genealogy of Morals,” 161. Philosophers are no better, he says, because they benefit from the quiet undistracted life that comes from not getting married and from not trying to acquire wealth. It is in their nature to want time and space to think. These ascetic practices make the life they want possible. Showing restraint in attaining goods others quest for earns them respect. The public is put under their power through the awe that their ascetic lifestyles evoke. Nietzsche, “A Genealogy of Morals,” 146. Instead of honoring them for having attained these life denying virtues, he says, we should see them for what they truly are: convenient ideals, easily attained by the few, that can be used to evoke awe in others. For

understanding, the “ascetic” idea is a useful tool for religious leaders who teach the lower classes to accept their current suffering for the rewards of an afterlife with the result that religion becomes a mechanism for the oppression of humans as economic agents. Religion prompts the lower classes to seek “virtues” that don’t lead to monetary or social benefit but instead make them complacent. He writes, “The social principles of Christianity place the... compensation for all infamies in heaven, and thereby justify the continuation of these infamies on earth.”<sup>26</sup> Marx did not believe there was an afterlife; he sees living for the goods rewarded in that life as a pernicious fantasy. He sought to promote new ends for human striving.<sup>27</sup> “To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness.”<sup>28</sup> Religion is at its very heart ascetic, so focused on transcendent goals as to be no earthly good.

This negative attitude persists. Since the early twentieth century, many have linked asceticism to brutality and deception, on the assumption that ascetic life is about extreme self-denial, pathological problems with sexuality, and denigration of the body through self-flagellation, long hours of prayer and fasting, vows of silence and seclusion.<sup>29</sup> But these

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Nietzsche, ascetic “virtues” are not truly worth having. They are merely a tool philosophers and religious leaders use to attain power and prestige.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “The Communism of the Rheinischer Beobachter,” *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels Collected Works, vol. 6* (Russia: International Publishers, 1976), 231.

<sup>27</sup> “The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness, in short, all the qualities of the rabble, and the proletariat, which will not permit itself to be treated as rabble, needs its courage, its self-confidence, its pride and its sense of independence even more than its bread.” Marx and Engels, “Communism,” 231.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” *Collected Works 3* (Moscow: VanstoneProgress Printers, 1975), 176. Marx argued that humans need to be emancipated from all relations to higher orders or higher beings. The very idea of a god is oppressive since it makes humans lesser. He predicted the overthrow of religion would lead to emancipation for all and would allow for a new way of ordering all aspects of life. For those thinkers who wanted to avoid the more general critique of asceticism but were not ready to abandon religion all together, the best direction would be to minimize any teaching about an afterlife.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Oscar Hardman’s early twentieth-century *Ideals of Asceticism* begins with a description of some of the more negative attitudes toward asceticism in his time. While beginning by noticing that asceticism is in some cases, like with athletes, viewed as a “legitimate discipline or mortification of the body ... by others [it is seen] to be nothing but unjustifiable brutality prompted by a mistaken creed,” Hardman notes that in his own day there were some who still respected

practices are not, in and of themselves, things our contemporary culture rejects. They are opened to suspicion because these practices are performed for transcendent ends, for a God many no longer believe in.<sup>30</sup>

There are, in contrast, great appreciation and many accolades for the scientist or athlete or political organizer whose single-minded devotion to a cause allows for great success in accomplishing their ends.<sup>31</sup> Working one's body to exhaustion, even to the point of hurting oneself both mentally and physically, is a regular part of the life of most athletes.<sup>32</sup> Some sports, like boxing and wrestling are built around causing physical damage to one's opponent. Reality shows like *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, and *The Biggest Loser* regularly ask participants to do horribly painful things to themselves for the sake of winning a cash

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asceticism for its self-discipline, but many already heard the word and thought of brutality and deception. This attitude has changed little in western discourse about asceticism. (3).

<sup>30</sup> People who participate in these religious lifestyles may still receive some acclaim if their lives are seen to be dedicated in special ways to humanitarian causes. But the life of contemplation or celibacy is often spoke about with incredulity and an expectation that it is brutalizing to the practitioner. See Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 39-40. She cites A. W. Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited* (New York: Vrunner-Routledge, 2003); Andrew M. Greeley, *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004); David France, *Our Fathers: The Secret Life of the Catholic Church in an Age of Scandal* (New York: Broadway, 2004), as all suggesting that celibacy is unnatural and even harmful.

<sup>31</sup> For an example of a scientist who worked tirelessly and without recognition for many years and in conditions of near poverty see "The Unlikely Pioneer Behind mRNA Vaccines" *The Daily*, The New York Times (June 10, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/10/podcasts/the-daily/mrna-vaccines-katalin-kariko.html>. For an example of an extreme diet and lifestyle change by a football star see, "Tom Brady was 'hurting all the time' at 25 and knew he had to make a lifestyle change to keep playing football," *Insider*, (Feb 4, 2021), <https://www.businessinsider.com/tom-brady-says-diet-lifestyle-saved-his-career-2017-2>

<sup>32</sup>Light has been shed on the toll these extreme lifestyles take on the athletes themselves. Gymnast Simone Biles was unable to compete during the Tokyo 2020 (2021) Olympics sparking an international conversation about the mental health of elite athletes. This is another version of the asceticism conversation, but in a different register. One of the key differences is that the goods, medals, acclaim, etc., sought by the athlete are assumed to be worth having. "How the Tokyo Olympics Changed the Conversation About Athletes' Mental Health," *Time Magazine*, August 8, 2021, <https://time.com/6088078/mental-health-olympics-simone-biles/>. "What If Everything We Know About Gymnastics Is Wrong?," *The New York Times Magazine*, last updated August 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/04/magazine/gymnastics-abuse.html>. "Our Culture of Winning at All Costs Is Broken. It Almost Broke Me.," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/opinion/culture/sports-mental-health-olympics.html>.

prize.<sup>33</sup> Prayer may not be in vogue, but spending hours meditating is seen as laudable and respectable among the elite.<sup>34</sup> Fasting to get skinny, for general healthy living, or for supporting longevity has become commonplace.<sup>35</sup> Sexual self-control is being talked about as building consent culture.<sup>36</sup> All this discourse demonstrates that we want to live in a society where people can use self-restraint, where the satisfaction of every desire or every whim is not the ideal. The training of desire, of the physical body or of the intellect, is not the problem.

The problem our society has had with asceticism is a dispute over which desires should and shouldn't be controlled. This is really a deeper dispute about the goal of human existence. What is worth doing with the limited time we have on earth? The dispute is over the virtues worth loving and living one's life to attain. The ends of religious asceticism

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<sup>33</sup> In *Survivor*, a challenge called "Keep on Your Toes" included requiring contestants to stand on their toes in a frame and keep a block pressed between their head and the top of the frame. "Keep on Your Toes," *Survivor Wiki*, [https://survivor.fandom.com/wiki/Keep\\_on\\_Your\\_Toes](https://survivor.fandom.com/wiki/Keep_on_Your_Toes), accessed Jan 3, 2022. *Fear Factor* had people doing things that were gross that also led to being very painful. See Donn Saylor, "The All Time Nastiest Moments on 'Fear Factor,'" *Ranker* (Sept. 20, 2018), <https://www.ranker.com/list/nastiest-fear-factor-moments/donn-saylor>. The *Biggest Loser* used very dangerous and painful methods for weight loss. See Maureen Callahan, "The Brutal Secrets behind 'The Biggest Loser,'" *The New York Post*, (Jan 18, 2015) <https://nypost.com/2015/01/18/contestant-reveals-the-brutal-secrets-of-the-biggest-loser/>.

<sup>34</sup> See: Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, "Mantras before Math Class," *The Atlantic* (Nov. 10, 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/11/mantras-before-math-class/412618/>; David DeSteno, "The Kindness Cure," *The Atlantic* (July 12, 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/07/mindfulness-meditation-empathy-compassion/398867/>; Roni Caryn Rabin, "Regimens: Meditation, for the Mind and Heart," *The New York Times* (Nov. 23, 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/health/research/24regi.html?searchResultPosition=40>.

<sup>35</sup> See: Jane Brody, "The Benefits of Intermittent Fasting," *The New York Times* (Feb. 17, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/well/eat/the-benefits-of-intermittent-fasting.html?searchResultPosition=1>; Valter D. Longo et. al, "Intermittent and Periodic Fasting, Longevity and Disease," *Nature Aging* 1 (2021):47–59, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43587-020-00013-3>.

<sup>36</sup> See: Sally Dillon "Teaching Consent to Children: 'The Joke is Where it Starts and Rape is Where it Ends,'" *The Guardian* (March 20, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/mar/21/teaching-consent-to-children-the-joke-is-where-it-starts-and-is-where-it-ends>; Katie Mettler, "'No Means No' to 'Yes means Yes': How our Language around Sexual Consent has Changed," *The Washington Post* (Feb. 15, 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soloish/wp/2018/02/15/no-means-no-to-yes-means-yes-how-our-language-around-sexual-consent-has-changed/>.

include the cultivation of “passive” virtues, or the attainment of some heavenly reward, but our active, self-assertive, and production-obsessed society assumes that this kind of religion is toxic to the flourishing of the human self. And perhaps they are right. It may indeed be toxic to the full flowering of the contemporary national, economic and consumer self.<sup>37</sup> But is this the extent of our definition of the “good life”? The broad-brush critique of religion as “life denying” serves to pre-emptively exclude religions from that conversation.

A new asceticism seeks not only to revivify traditional ritual practices but also to re-enter this bigger conversation. But to do that, I have a choice to make. I could construct an oppositional relationship to the critiques like the ones I’ve outlined above and push my way back in, yelling about being excluded and about my rights to participate in the public square. Or I can avoid this oppositional frame and seek to internalize what can be learned from the criticism, coming to the conversation with more wisdom. Charles Taylor, the Canadian Catholic philosopher and Sarah Coakley, the British Anglican theologian, are thinkers who have taken the second option. Taylor’s thinking, infused by his characteristic spirit of generosity, offers to this conversation a standard for evaluating conceptions of human flourishing that internalize some of the crucial truths in this last century of critique. Coakley, a theologian deeply formed by her Christian practice and by her contributions to feminist theology, offers a model for a new asceticism that takes seriously both the ways in which the ascetic can be abused but is also necessary for a renewal of commitment to the

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<sup>37</sup> William T. Cavanaugh in *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), argues that Christians are called to create alternative practices that change the economic and consumer culture. Norman Wirzba “Imagine a Sabbath Economy,” *The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University* (2002): 31-35, <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/SabbatharticleWirzba.pdf>, argues for the need for a new economic order based in Christian Sabbath principles. Paul Henry Martens, argues in his dissertation “Suffering and the Christian Life: The Asceticism of Søren Kierkegaard” (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2019), that Kierkegaard is best understood as a Christian ascetic whose ascetic approach offers the Christian a modern way of being devout while rejecting Christian nationalism and the selfish aims of modern nation states. See also Paul Henry Martens, “Kierkegaard and the Peaceable Kingdom,” *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith*, eds. Paul Martins and C. Stephen Evans, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

“devout life.” In this chapter I evaluate her teachings on desire formation and the definition of asceticism she offers in a collection of essays called *The New Asceticism*. I argue that her reengagement with asceticism demonstrates an ascetic discourse that manages to avoid violating Taylor’s “maximal demand.” This chapter serves the project of the dissertation by bringing together Taylor’s standard for evaluating ascetic goals for human flourishing with a definition of asceticism that does not violate this standard. This chapter sets up a standard for evaluating my constructive work of articulating a new Jewish vision for human flourishing.

### **2.1.2 Changing Conceptions of the Self**

The changing opinions about asceticism in Western thought are linked to changing understandings of the self and of its relationship to desire. Below I unpack a few key pieces of Taylor’s complex story which, because of the limits of space, I can only summarize in the briefest way. I touch on what makes possible the re-imagination of desire as deeply important for identity. Taylor describes the shift from relating to desire as a source of bondage that keeps humans from expressing their most authentic nature to our pervasive modern approach to desire as deeply significant for understanding who we uniquely are. Any vision that would lead to denigrating ordinary human desires is now perceived as teaching people to despise their very self, to abandon who they “really” are. These changes in how we construct desire’s significance are linked to the relationship of society to ethical definitions of fullness and religious visions of human flourishing. After considering the merits and demerits of these different account of desire, I introduce Taylor’s “maximal demand” as a standard by which we might speak about transcendent visions of human flourishing that could avoid these modern critiques.

In the way contemporary people conceptualize inwardness, “the self” is not static. In contrast, Charles Taylor describes the ancient western view of the self as a “permanent, stable, unchanging core of being” that lives beneath the “shifting desires in the unwise soul.”<sup>38</sup> According to these ancient philosophical models the stable point in the self is reason, and it serves to ground us, providing an unwavering foundation in a shifting world. On this model, each individual self is one expression of a universal human nature that is stable, something that we can each live in accordance with if we train ourselves properly to live from that stable place.<sup>39</sup> Desire, especially appetitive desire, on the ancient model, is distraction, not a window onto who we are, not a source for defining our identity.<sup>40</sup> Asceticism is the process by which a person learns to protect herself from the distracting power of desire to confuse and misdirect her life, freeing herself to live in accordance with reason, providing her with a foundation that is constant, that she can trust. Asceticism, on

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 178.

<sup>39</sup> The notion of a human nature is no longer something philosophers speak of with such confidence. The ontological certainty implied by such a conversation suggests a vantage point on existence and the truth of that existence that seems impossible. Phenomenology tries to avoid essentialist claims about human nature while still talking about what human beings do; it then seeks to make explicit the meaning implicit in that activity. One could frame this dissertation as having a phenomenological style because it will end in an attempt to describe prayer as an ascetic practice, not seeking to make an ontological claim but merely a meaningful one. It is also, of course, a theological project. As such, it still makes claims about human nature that have some authority within the scriptural tradition they come from.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Satlow, “‘And on the Earth You Shall Sleep’: ‘Talmud Torah’ and Rabbinic Asceticism,” *The Journal of Religion* 83, No. 2 (2003); 212, offers a quick summary example of this idea in the thought of Plato:

According to Plato, the soul is comprised of three parts. The largest part of the soul is “appetitive” and irrational; this part generates bodily desires. Plato identified two other parts of the soul, the rational and the spirited. These, he thought, were “higher” than the appetitive part. They band together to control the irrational appetitive part of the soul: “And these two, thus reared and having learned and been educated to do their own work in the true sense of the phrase, will preside over the appetitive part which is the mass of the soul in each of us and the most insatiate by nature of wealth. They will keep watch upon it, lest, by being filled and infected with the so-called pleasures associated with the body and so waxing big and strong, it may not keep to its own work but may undertake to enslave and rule over the classes which it is not fitting that it should, and so overturn the entire life of all.” (Plato, Republic 442A-B {trans. Paul Shorey, LCL 1:406-9}). Philosophers throughout late antiquity subscribed to this understanding of the soul, with its inner conflict between its rational and irrational (appetitive) parts.

this model, is the process by which a person learns to self-transcend the changing and shifting inner world.

This ancient conception of human nature is reimagined in western philosophy. Taylor tells the story of the emergence of the modern self in his books *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. His intellectual history offers an account not merely of the “great” personalities but also digs into the material and cultural factors that lead to our modern social-imaginary. In the account that follows I offer only one small part of that story by bringing our attention to Michel de Montaigne, the French renaissance philosopher, 1533-1592 CE.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to his predecessors’ emphasis on the self’s potential for stability, if trained properly, i.e. ascetically, Montaigne describes the self as always in flux, in between, in a state of perpetual change. He redefines “nature” away from the then regnant notion of human nature that expected that we live in accordance with the telos of our nature; instead “nature” is what we find when we look at ourselves without any training. Montaigne encouraged living life “conformably to its natural condition,” not seeking to accomplish superhuman spiritual aspirations; rather he professed living within the limits of what is “natural,” writing:

I have... taken for my regard this ancient precept, very rawly and simply: That “We cannot erre in following Nature”: and that the souveraigne document is, for a man to conforme himselfe to her. I have not (as Socrates) by the power and vertue of reason, corrected my natural complexions, nor by Art hindered mine inclination.<sup>42</sup> For Montaigne to follow nature was to accept the limits of nature, distance ourselves from excessive moral rigor, and avoid living according to rules that “exceed our use and excel our strength,”<sup>43</sup> i.e., no more living toward high aspirations that squash enjoyment of ordinary

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<sup>41</sup> Montaigne’s thinking illustrates one of the shifts in the relationship of the self to desire that is important for understanding the rejection of asceticism in modernity. It is important to note that I am not suggesting his influence alone brought about this change.

<sup>42</sup> Michael de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio (New York: Modern Library, 1933), 958, as quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 180. Spelling reflects the original quotation.

<sup>43</sup> Montaigne, 897, quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 180. “Excel” means “to transcend.”

human experience. If we set unrealistic expectations, we can only end up fostering contempt for ourselves.

Montagne's vision for human flourishing should sound familiar to us because we live in a world saturated by the ideals of personal self-acceptance and ordinary human fulfillments as the goals of life. By unmooring individuals from a vision of human nature that sets standards for desire formation, desire gets a new role; we become identified with the longings we have. Instead of thinking that we live most freely by expressing that universal quality of humanness, namely rationality, we embrace the idea that it is by engaging our particular uniqueness, our unique talents and desires, that we flourish. Living up to our potential becomes a massive burden, demanding a lot of time to first understanding that potential, and then a lot of fretting about how we go about chasing it in light of the constraints on our life. A great deal of state social policy is directed toward helping people attain their potential by fixing access to material gain and professional success that are seen by many to be the natural attainments of a flourishing life. In modernity our vision for human flourishing is often simplistically linked to the most common human desires. Quests to actualize transcendent goals are perceived as silly distractions. It is this quest for ourselves, through our desires, which turns western culture away from asceticism and the conscious formation of desire. Desire, we are told, is there to be a guide to who we are, not a tool for attaining other goals! True liberty is being able to follow our desires to wherever they lead.

### **2.1.3 A return to the ordinary and the "maximal demand"**

Taylor observes that in our world today, we maintain a broad consensus that there are certain basic human goods, certain "ordinary human desires" which we accept as good,

desires that conform to the moral order of freedom and mutual benefit are “normal.”<sup>44</sup> Any exploration of desire that fits within these bounds is “normal,” and denigrating any element of desire that fits within this “normal” is seen as placing too large of a burden on people.<sup>45</sup> As he writes, “Hatred at Christianity for having defamed, polluted, rendered impure ordinary human sensual desire is one of the most powerful motivations which impelled people to take the option for an exclusive humanism once this became thinkable.”<sup>46</sup> This critique, he observes, drives many away from religious teaching in our contemporary world. It even evokes a hatred of religion, often tarring it with the accusation of having polluted and made impure what are merely ordinary human desires.<sup>47</sup> To re-embrace asceticism

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<sup>44</sup> As Taylor writes in *Secular Age*, 623-624, anyone whose desires deviate from this “normal” is pathologized, understood as sick or broken by avoidable traumas, faulty upbringings or under-developed. Human impulses to “violence, aggression, domination; and/or those to wild sexual license,” fall outside the bounds of the desires that are ennobled in this modern take on the self. The establishment of “normal” as all those actions which support the modern moral order is understandable because when exclusive humanism arose these disciplines were already widely internalized by a large part of the population. But this truth does not change the fact that some people experience as essential to their fulfillment desires that others consider sick and/or evil. Forcing them to change through therapy or restraint is a sacrifice we demand of them for the general good. This is an example of where coercive control over human desires is still maintained within the context of exclusive humanism. A religious approach to these desires would recognize them as part of the sinful capacity of all human beings. Rather than making people with these desires “monstrous” or “deviant,” the Christian approach would invite them into a connection with God and the ascetic work of transforming their desires in the light of God’s love. They would be given the same invitation as everyone. “The exclusive humanist approach to pathologize the “not normal” implies a too rosy picture of the human condition; they maintain a pretense about reality that bowdlerizes it and runs the risk of dehumanizing people who cannot live up to their expectations. For more on this topic see Taylor, *Secular Age*, 623-624. Taylor suggests the continued existence of these violent desires creates a dilemma for the current anti-ascetic therapeutic consensus. It reveals an inability of the new modern system to grapple with the human condition, ironically the very thing they accuse religion of failing at. Does this invite the need again for the ascetic? Perhaps there is space to reimagine that identity is found not just in discovering and then following desires but in what we chose to live for, how we chose to form our desire?

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 632, describes an anti-transcendent humanism, a humanism that sees itself as needing to fight religious visions of human flourishing and their attendant ascetic paths of desire formation, as “frequently dismissive of, and sometimes cruel to deviants, classing them as misfits or people actuated by ill-will.” He suggests that descriptions of people as “misogynists” or “racists” for minor infractions is an example of this aggressive demonizing that flows from their approach to all difference from the “normal.” Because they believe “normal” human behavior spontaneously conforms with the modern moral order without the need for civilizing disciplines, any deviation is an illness or ill-will.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 626.

<sup>47</sup> Political movements are built on claiming legitimacy for these maligned desires, on constructing identity groups out of people’s sexual orientation. This makes central to selfhood the embracing of

would seem to many as a return to despising desire. A new asceticism will offer a theological vision for human flourishing with an ascetic component that does not despise the body nor sexual desire.

Maintaining the goodness of ordinary human experience, of simple desires, is one element of Taylor's "maximal demand," a way of talking about transcendent ideals that can be pursued without "purging, or denigrating, ordinary fulfillments."<sup>48</sup> One way to do that is to avoid grasping for transcendence as a way to flee the human condition. Martha Nussbaum, in *Love's Knowledge*,<sup>49</sup> argues that our transcendent aspirations can flow from existential fear, fear of our own limitations, our finitude, neediness, and fallibility. The roots of our desire for transcendence she links to our attempt to get away from that fear, fear of death, fear of being wrong, fear of dependence.<sup>50</sup> Nussbaum cautions us, fleeing these vulnerabilities is fleeing from ourselves, from our human condition.<sup>51</sup> When ascetic goals take us away from the particular and remove us from the delicate dance with vulnerability, they invite us to become something other than what we are, they invite us to avoid our own humanity, or even despise it. Western culture has brought our society to reembrace the

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desires and their expression while rejecting religious opinions and what are perceived to be oppressive attitudes.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 640.

<sup>49</sup> I am depending on Taylor for this reading of Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), Chapter 15, quoted in Taylor, *Secular Age*, 625.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor notes that Nussbaum is articulating a Nietzschean style polemic against religion, one that is constitutive of our secular age. She weaves a genealogical story of the "origins" of Christian disgust at human sensual desire and lays the blame on our own desire to transcend our human circumstance. Longing for transcendence induces, she says, hatred and disgust toward human neediness and ordinary human desires. Both Nietzsche and Nussbaum suggest that Christianity transformed and internalized Platonism's disdain for physicality. Of course, the through line is never so simple. Christian theology has the resources of incarnation and bodily resurrection to draw on and there is a rich post-Reformation heritage of ascribing dignity to labor and family. This critique only captures a small part of the story. See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 640.

<sup>51</sup> She argues that a life lived without risk is a life without goodness. Human life is beautiful because it is fleeting. Human love, care and mutual support open us up to loss, pain, regret. Her point, contra Plato, is that human flourishing is found in attachment to the instantiations of beauty around us, not through attachment to the abstract Beautiful. See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 626, citing Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, Chapter 12.

body and to celebrate ordinary human fulfillments. It is crucial that we not lose the truthfulness of what we have learned. A new way of imagining identity, desire, and the human condition also requires a way of talking about asceticism and human flourishing.

Charles Taylor joins in the condemnation of a Christian theology that would espouse hatred of the body or of desire. He calls this kind of theology a deviation.<sup>52</sup> But he also points out that we can rediscover the riches of the ordinary without abandoning transcendent aspirations and the ascetic process of formation. Instead of saying “a pox on all transcendence” which elicits an equally venomous and unreflective defense of “cramped, obsessed deviations” of the faith, we might take a more nuanced approach: admit when something is wrong, name the wrong, and consider what valuable and genuine aspiration could have generated the wrong to begin with.<sup>53</sup> Finally, figure out a way to overcome the wrong teaching while still preserving the valuable aspiration.<sup>54</sup> The goal is to articulate a vision of attaining truly transcendent ends while fully including the immanent goods that motivated the critique of asceticism. Taylor has summarized here a valuable way to approach a lot of cultural conflicts as well as a methodology for a new ascetic discourse.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 631. This is another form of counterfeit asceticism. Theologies of incarnation and creation make the denigration of the body a violation of the internal logic of Christianity. When egoistical desires are transcended through ascetic practice, when unregenerate desire no longer moves a person, this does not have to be understood as the abandonment of the body or of finitude. For Taylor, *Secular Age*, 644, the Christian ideal is to incarnate agape as compassion. Incarnation implies an honored role for the body as the bearer of transformed love that overcomes selfishness.

<sup>53</sup> For example, the struggle with sexual fulfillment. Taylor notes that there is a real tension in attempting to actualize in one life both piety and sexual fulfillment. “Intense and profound sexual fulfillment focusses us powerfully on the exchange within the couple; it strongly attaches us possessively to what is privately shared... It was not for nothing that the early monks and hermits saw sexual renunciation as opening the way to the wider love of God.” The goal, Taylor says is to not allow the logic of this tension to push us into accepting that these goods are “constitutively incompatible.” See *Secular Age*, 645.

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 631.

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Coakley is someone who offers this kind of approach when thinking about the church sexual scandals and the implications of those scandals on celibacy for clergy. See “Ecclesiastical Sex Scandals: The Lack of a Contemporary Theology of Desire” in *The New Asceticism*, 29-54.

We not only can find a way forward, Taylor argues, we must. As a society, we are facing a crisis of purposefulness brought on partly by our inability to talk about flourishing human life and the paths to its fulfillment.<sup>56</sup> We need to be willing to reengage. Taylor leaves contemporary theologians and philosophers with a challenge. It is crucial that we “define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn’t crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity.”<sup>57</sup> The challenge, he says, is to get the balance right. Too far in one direction, toward the aspiration of transcendence, and we mortify the particular human being. But, too far in the other direction, will have us reimagine the goals of human flourishing as something that “normal” people should be able to attain and the ordinary human predicament as not all that difficult or ethically problematic. Taylor summarizes these possibilities in the following critique of modern religious options:

...you (religious people) have conceived our highest aspirations in such a way that to realize them you will have to mutilate humanity (the mortifying reproach); so naturally, you are induced surreptitiously to scale down your demands, and also to hide from yourselves the full power of human sensuality and aggression, so that ordinary and redeemed humanity can be brought within hailing range of each other – you thus merit the bowdlerizing reproach. In reality this sets out a dilemma: you only escape one horn by impaling yourself on the other.<sup>58</sup>

When we maintain high aspirations for human life, we run the risk of mutilating ourselves and our enjoyment of the goods of this life to accomplish them. When we lower our expectations for human flourishing, we begin to expect everyone to live up to this new, more basic, standard. Failing to do so makes one sick or evil. This second approach has

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 628. In light of these critiques, it seems reasonable to say, “Asceticism is dangerous, why retrieve it at all?” Taylor’s account helps us to see that to give up asceticism is to give up conversation about human flourishing, about the good life and the path toward its fulfillment, about the art of life. We are facing a crisis of purposefulness in human existence. We have few examples in western secular life for purposeful living. There is a profound incoherence at the base of our modern moral assumption summarized by Solovyov as “Man descends from apes, therefore we must love each other” (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 596). Our society seems to be losing the energy and reason for living a moral life of mutual benefit to others.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 640.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 641.

reimagined the human condition excised of its more “deviant” expressions and removed transcendent elements from a flourishing life. This is what Taylor means by bowdlerizing. It’s a reimagined story about what humans are and what they are capable of that cuts off the extreme lows and highs.

A way of life that accomplishes the “maximal demand” avoids denigrating the human condition and avoids scaling back the vision for human flourishing or misidentifying the full potential for depravity within the human condition. Finding a way to talk about flourishing while maintaining the maximal demand is not easy. It might be tempting to try to avoid the critique of the ascetic in religion by abandoning all claims that humans need formation, that there is anything wrong with us, to claim humans as essentially good. But a religious community that takes this approach will struggle to support and make sense of the darker aspects of the human condition. It may be able to offer comfort to those who by dint of upbringing or genetic luck are able to live rather easily within the narrow band of normal behavior acceptable within a capitalistic society. But a religious tradition, framed in this way, is unable to minister to those outside the economically successful because its spiritual practices are not suited to assisting those who struggle with some of the deeper problems of the human condition. Those people are left to the psychologists to be pathologized.<sup>59</sup> As Taylor notes, it isn’t just religious traditions that have this problem; secular-humanists share it as well. Their social engineering projects struggle because they underestimate human capacities for things like de-humanization, anger, violence, dangerous desires, and aspirations for power and domination.<sup>60</sup> The conundrum we face is real.

In summary, the “maximal demand” is a standard that can help us avoid “counterfeit” versions of asceticism. On the one hand it insists that humans are in need of a

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<sup>59</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 623.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 641.

transcendent vision for a flourishing life that goes beyond the simple completion of a material or professional checklist. Flourishing needs to include more than acquiring a wife, a house, a dog, kids, a good job, and a truck. It also cannot denigrate the goodness of these ordinary human experiences and simple desires. The “maximal demand” is the maximal vision for human transcendence that both avoids denigrating ordinary human fulfillments and at the same time is able to talk about ideals without misrepresenting the frailty of the human condition. The vision for human transcendence must include practices that can help everyone, no matter their economic and professional potential, attain to the ideal.<sup>61</sup> This is Taylor’s challenge.

As a way of offering a response, I bring our attention now to the work of Sarah Coakley on asceticism. Her definition of asceticism and work on the topic within Christian theology charts a way forward for the contemporary conversation about prayer and self-formation that this dissertation seeks to construct in a Jewish key. In a small volume entitled *The New Asceticism*, Coakley offers a proposal for a new vision of ascetic life founded on Christian spiritual disciplines of prayer and contemplation.<sup>62</sup> She draws on

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 640-641.

<sup>62</sup> *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) is a collection of essays that complements an earlier work, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), in which she offers an extensive analysis of desire within Christian theology and gives it a central role in the reason for the doctrine of the trinity. She takes a fresh look at the elision of the Biblical prophetic idea of God’s primal desire for God’s people and the human response of love, with the Platonic idea of human desire always intrinsically pulled back toward the heavenly realm of the “forms.” In *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, she concludes that desire is “the constellating category of selfhood, the ineradicable root of one’s longing for God.... [A] theological analysis ... puts desire at the root—both anthropologically in the human, and theologically in the divine.” But she avoids the subsuming of all human love as really misguided or clouded-over love of God, as Augustine would have it. Instead, she says, “Desire, I now suggest – even fallen desire— is the precious clue woven into the crooked human heart that ever reminds it of its relatedness and its source” (58). Coakley describes desire as a clue to the transcendent that is us and to our source, elevating human awareness, without transcending the particular longing felt by the particular person. This theology of desire leaves room for the feelings of desire in the world to be more than just an obstacle to righteousness or a distraction from the love of God but instead to be a clue to a fundamental truth. At the heart of Coakley’s systematic theology is the “dependence of human desire on divine desire as both its source and goal” (92) and the ascetic path as a graced path of personal transformation in response to divine truth whose terminus is orthodoxy (not as “mere

Gregory of Nyssa's theology of desire to offer a creative alternative to false contemporary dichotomy of repression and libertinism. She models a retrieval of theological resources to help correct some pervasive misconceptions about self, desire, the good life, and the practices of formation. Her approach affirms Christian traditions which call the human person to formation, to relationship with transcendence, and to lives of holiness, while at the same time embracing the mundane goodness and excellence inherent to the human condition. For the remainder of this chapter, I introduce her approach to asceticism and then evaluate it in light of Taylor's description of the "maximal demand".

## **2.2 COAKLEY'S NEW CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM: WE ARE CONFUSED ABOUT DESIRE**

Sarah Coakley says that she decided to write about asceticism because of "the conviction that Western secular concerns about bodily life in general...are marked by certain striking and unresolved paradoxes, ones which are arguably still haunted by a lost religious past."<sup>63</sup> She believes that teachings from the religious past that have been repressed or misunderstood can help us get past the paradoxes. *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* is a collection of essays offering a creative retrieval of ascetic disciplines and teachings on desire from the Christian tradition. Her thinking on how to go about this retrieval is framed by many years of work in feminist Christian theology. I will draw on some of that scholarship as I explain her retrieval of asceticism.

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credal correctness nor imposed ecclesiastical regulation") but as the horizon of theology, spirituality, and ethics (89-90).

<sup>63</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 1.

Coakley claims that the terms “desire” and “asceticism” are freighted with unconscious notions that limit the scope of their application and thus our ability to talk coherently about the relationship of desire and the ascetic.

The chief problem with the category of “desire” is that it has become so heavily sexualized in the modern, post-Freudian period as to render its connection with other desires (including the desire for God) obscure and puzzling. The chief problem with the category of “asceticism” is that within the same period it has become larded with the negative associations of repression, ecclesiastical authoritarianism, and denial.<sup>64</sup>

Both of these terms have been misunderstood by popularized versions of Freudian, Nietzschean, and Foucauldian power analysis. All three of these thinkers have made huge contributions to our understanding of the relationship between gender, desire, and power but, she argues, their thinking should not be taken up uncritically by theologians. These thinkers all presumed that God is a fiction; this is certainly not an assumption that theologians share with them and it matters.<sup>65</sup>

Even so, Coakley does not want to abandon or denigrate the ways in which these thinkers have helped us become aware of power relations. There are good reasons feminist theologians express wariness about ascetic ideals and their potential to harm. The rhetoric of spiritual formation has been used by leaders to manipulate, to silence, and to abuse women sexually and physically.<sup>66</sup> Feminists are right to point to the ways that self-emptying

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<sup>64</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 11-12, points out that Freud, Nietzsche and Foucault change the Christian story by excising God. By removing the idea that ascetic structures for desire formation were a gift of a loving God for the sake of human flourishing, they turned the story into one of mere coercion by those seeking to gain power over others. Freud uses his psychoanalytic theory to remove the God-concept, suggesting it is a childish neurosis, and uses “reductive hermeneutics of suspicion in relation to ascetic practice.” The Nietzschean story, as Coakley summarizes it, centers on reading ascetic behavior as a power grab, encouraging people to live in awe of the practitioner so that the practitioner can then control them. This sowed the seeds for Foucault’s approach to both desire and asceticism in the mid-twentieth century. Foucault’s reductionist hermeneutics of suspicion continues this imaginative move by suggesting that religious leaders taught ascetic practices of sexual repression so that they could control and manage the power that living a life with unfulfilled sexual longing generates. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1978), 3-49.

<sup>66</sup> “Precisely as male theology has wallowed in a new adulation of ‘vulnerability’ and ‘receptivity’ ... feminist theology has emerged to make its rightful protest. Such a strategy, it has urged, merely

theology as a model for female behavior is dangerous.<sup>67</sup> That discourse has been used for so many centuries to encourage female subjugation to abusive male authorities. A large amount of skepticism is warranted. But Coakley does not think the abuse of asceticism should justify its abandonment. She warns of a

...longer-term, danger to Christian feminism in the repression of all forms of “vulnerability,” and in a concomitant failure to confront issues of fragility, suffering or “self-emptying” except in terms of victimology. And that is ultimately the failure to embrace a feminist reconceptualizing of the power of the cross and the resurrection. Only ... by facing – and giving new expression to – the paradoxes of “losing one’s life in order to save it,” can feminists hope to construct a vision of the Christic “self” that transcends the gender stereotypes we are seeking to up-end.<sup>68</sup>

Her call to fellow feminists is to step beyond the deconstructive analysis that leads only to a critique of central Christian teachings like the significance of the cross or of the incarnational humility of Christ. Stepping through the critique to come out on the other side with a new way of speaking theologically about these themes which have implications for desire, ego, asceticism is the way that the critique’s gains will actually be secured for the future.

The critique of asceticism, while truthful, has also impacted the kinds of topics Christian feminist theologians take up in their scholarship. In *Powers and Submissions*, Coakley notices that many Christian feminists don’t reckon with the need for self-formation. This lack of attention to one’s own need for desire formation as a leader makes much more likely the continued abuse of power, even if power is in the hands of women. She commends spiritual practices like contemplation that she says can:

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instantiates, in legitimating doctrinal form, the sexual, physical and emotional abuse that feminism seeks to expose. An abused God merely legitimates abuse.” Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), xv. Coakley cites J. L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992) as a source for understanding the particular ways in which this kind of theological approach is harmful to women who have suffered physical or sexual abuse.

<sup>67</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, xvii, details that significant feminist concerns about ascetic practice include “that such practice encourages societal ‘submissiveness’, disassociated introversion, apolitical anesthesia, or the silencing of ‘women’.” For more on how Coakley directly addresses these concerns see *Powers and Submissions*, chapter 1.

<sup>68</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 33.

be a graced means of human empowerment in the divine which the feminist movement ignores or derides at its peril.... to leap to the supposedly clear-cut goal of “justice” without delicate training in attending to the “other”; to impose programs of reform without considering self-reform and self-knowledge; to up-end “patriarchal” power without considering the possibility of the mimetic feminist abuse of power: such, we may say, are the looming dangers of feminist institutional “success.”<sup>69</sup>

Coakley is careful to appreciate and voice that there are reasons for this gap in attentiveness to formation. But the inability to talk about the ascetic path without moving into a mode of looking for oppression and victimization leaves women vulnerable to aping the very “masculinism” they criticize.<sup>70</sup>

Coakley’s critique of fellow feminists could be read as a conflict, but I think it is most properly read as a maturation of feminist theology. As an Anglican priest and theologian, Coakley lives her feminism in the very role she plays in the church. I see Coakley calling for and offering new theological vision for understanding desire and asceticism that does not reject the feminist critiques, but instead offers new insight from within her fully integrated perspective as a female Christian theologian. By Coakley’s account, the achievements of modern critical approaches to asceticism leave us unable to reason well about desire for the challenges we currently face. We are trapped in binaries of sexual repression versus libertinism or victim versus oppressor that harm many of our current cultural debates by hemming in our creativity to address real issues.<sup>71</sup> Answers to ethical issues are left unaddressed because we are not engaging with ethical formation, the root of asceticism.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, xvii.

<sup>70</sup> Coakley, like Taylor, is a generous thinker. She demonstrates that in the way that she takes time in her book to flesh out some of the insidious ways that contemplative practices like spiritual direction can cause inappropriate subordination of women to male authorities and lead to the trivialization of women’s voices. See: *Powers and Submissions*, Chapter 2.

<sup>71</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 15.

<sup>72</sup> Wimbush and Valantasis in their “Introduction” to a collection called *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxix, also make a similar observation about the link between ethics and asceticism. “By severing ethics from its ascetical roots, postmodern society loses its memory about personal and corporate development, finds itself incapable of molding people who live ethically, and remains paralyzed in addressing questions of violence, hatred, bigotry, and abuse.”

Coakley wants to help us overcome the loss of wisdom about desire formation through the recovery and creative application of a new Christian asceticism.

Coakley says that her approach to thinking about asceticism is a development of a strand of thought championed, beginning in the late twentieth century, by theologians with monastic formation.<sup>73</sup> She claims that “ascetic formation, properly understood, involves a demanding integration of intellectual, spiritual and bodily practice over a life-time sustained by a complete vision of the Christian life and its ‘ends’.”<sup>74</sup> This definition of ascetic formation is quite different in emphasis from others we saw at the start of this chapter. Often the ascetic is only associated with practices of abstinence.<sup>75</sup> This definition in contrast, does not specify the kind of practices involved, making room for the practices to be either positive or negative. The definition also calls for a holistic approach to the human as mind, spirit and body. The formation going on is not merely emotional or merely intellectual; it isn’t the mastery of the body by the mind, or of desire by the intellect. It does not imply a body-soul dichotomy. The timescale this definition suggests is a lifetime. It implies a timeline that creates realistic expectations and makes little space for impatient, aggressive, and even violent shaping of the self. As Coakley writes, “The undertaking of

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<sup>73</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 18 n. 20, 19 n. 21, and 103 n. 1, situates her strand of thinking about asceticism in relationship to theological studies like Columba Stewart’s *Cassin the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Alasdair MacIntyre’s retrieval of the Benedictine Rule in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). In expanding this theological approach, Coakley is aware that her thinking shares some similarity with that of philosophers Bourdieu and Hadot in France, anthropologist Catharine Bell, and the project led by Vincent L. Wimbush (that included meetings at the American Academy of Religion and a major conference in 1993) that produced Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis eds., *Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). They all share an appreciation for and privileging of concrete practice and not just theorizing about practice.

<sup>74</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 18.

<sup>75</sup> For example, the definition offered by Richard Finn: “Asceticism may be defined as the voluntary abstention for philosophical or religious reasons from physical goods that are central to the well-being of humankind.” See his “Asceticism,” Oxford Bibliographies Online, Oxford University Press, 11 January 2012, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0110.xml>.

ascetic 'practice' is not one that comes with instant, commodifiable effects."<sup>76</sup> It is not a quick fix. In this definition, I hear a patient application of practice, a patient training meant to *accompany* a life, not to overturn it. And I hear in her words an invitation to a way of life that is always on the way toward greater skillfulness. This is not an approach to asceticism that privileges the people who theorize about it. Intellectual work without a bodily practice will lack the kind of integration we see described here. It will not be manifest in the world. It is also not an approach that rushes headlong toward mastery, as if the skills of this way of being could be acquired quickly with enough dedication and commitment. This is a definition that sees the long-serving faithful practitioner as the only expert.

This definition is also one that eschews a fearful fundamentalism, one that runs the risk of motivating an ascetic life for the wrong reasons and participating in it in a way that is too intellectually rigid. The ascetic path described here it is not a path walked out of fear, whether of desire, or of the world. This is a way of life motivated by longing, inspired by the vision of Christian life and its "ends,," This is also a path that will require a person to continually re-evaluate their understanding. By using the word "complete" along with "ends" in the plural, Coakley suggests a path walked with a humility that is open to learning and changing, growing in capacity as well as in understanding of what a truly complete vision of the "ends" of Christian life entails. The ascetic path of formation is a process of growing to spiritual maturity. It is a path that "allows forms of belief to emerge that could not otherwise be accessed." Coakley's claim is that, at the outset of a Christian life, it might seem like belief precedes "practice," but maturity involves beliefs and desire both undergoing a process of change.<sup>77</sup> A fearful clinging to what is first known stunts this

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<sup>76</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 101.

<sup>77</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 102, writes,

...everything depends on how "practices" and their attendant meaning-systems unfold through a sustained narrative of commitment. It follows that we may need to complexify the notion of "practice" from that on offer in contemporary secular philosophy in order to do

growth. The ascetic path is inspired by a vision of a destination, but it also expects to understand the end more completely or perfectly because of the life of practice.<sup>78</sup>

This definition of ascetic formation offers guardrails to the recovery of the ascetic, implying values that help keep ascetic practices from violating the “maximal demand.” But it is not foolproof. Coakley warns that the goodness of ascetic practices “depends on the context, tenor, freedom and fruits of the community in which they are produced and maintained, and the notion of God that inspires and sustains the whole.”<sup>79</sup> The ends to which a community directs its aspirations, the way they think about the God they pray to, matters. The ascetic life, Coakley believes, is directed toward a relationship with the infinite God, making how a community imagines God and understands God’s character and qualities crucial for how ascetic practices will be lived. The context for learning this way of life also matters. Coakley mentions, almost in passing, in one exposition of Gregory of Nyssa’s teaching in “On Virginity,” that “rightly channeled eros, whether married or celibate, is impossible without deep prayer and ascetic perseverance; but it is even more impossible... without shining examples to emulate.”<sup>80</sup> The context of a life matters. For Gregory of Nyssa,

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justice to the variety of different ways in which beliefs and practices are entangled with one another at different stages of an unfolding Christian life-journey.... [T]he logical relations of beliefs and practice may shift in different circumstances and stages of a Christian’s growth to spiritual maturity. Thus it is a vital part of this argument that the ‘deepening’ of practices, so described, allows forms of belief to emerge that could not otherwise be accessed, even though – at the outset of any Christian life of conscious commitment – it may seem that the relationship of belief and practice operates the other way around, with belief taking the primary and structuring role.

<sup>78</sup> Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 109, describes this kind of learning as part of the unitive stage of asceticism in which the beliefs are re-minted and theological insights are deepened. There are no quick shortcuts to these insights. They are the fruits of a life of practice. She commends the writings of the Anglican Priest W. H. Vanstone, *Love’s Endeavour, Love’s Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977); *The Stature of Waiting* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982); and *Icons of the Passion: A Way of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), as an example of this kind of theologizing that flows from a life formed by faithful Christian practice, in this case, the practice of ministry.

<sup>79</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 26. Coakley will go on in Ch. 3 to argue that the trinitarian conception of God is a powerful key to resisting asceticism’s potential for abuse.

<sup>80</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 51.

who was married, the life of his celibate brother Basil was a great source of inspiration to walk the path of desire transformation. Implied in this teaching is also another point that Coakley was not trying to make, but that I think is appropriate here. The ascetic life, to be lived well, requires guides from whom we can learn the practice and with whom we can converse about the challenges. The community among whom the ascetic life is lived matters for the success of that path.

Defining ascetic formation well can set us up for a successful approach to ascetic formation that fulfills the “maximal demand.” I believe Coakley’s definition has done this. I have also shown that Coakley’s writing respectfully engages critiques of asceticism.<sup>81</sup> My introduction to Coakley has so far shown her work to be a promising example of the kind of thinking that Taylor called for. In what follows we will look more closely at three areas of her thought that all demonstrate how she creatively retrieves ascetic teachings to help contemporary conversations about human flourishing. The first shows us how she uses the past to correct misunderstandings we hold in the present. The second shows her describing a new vision for the ascetic path and the potential flourishing life to which it leads. The third takes a deeper dive into one practice, contemplative prayer, and shows how paying close attention to particular ascetic practices can teach us about the “ends” that these practices accomplish. In each case, I evaluate her thinking in light of Taylor’s “maximal demand.”

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<sup>81</sup> She does argue against some of the applications of these critiques, pointing out where popular culture has done sloppy thinking. Coakley mentions explicitly that she is trying to undermine what she calls “sub-Freudianism,” the sexual teaching of secular newspapers and magazines. She considers these popularized versions of Freud, but also of Foucault, bowdlerized versions of their thinking, presentations that have removed the subtler elements of their analysis. See Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8; and Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 167 note 49. I do not see this kind of engagement as dismissive. It is actually respectful because it takes seriously the best arguments, while naming where others are not effective or are misleading.

### 2.2.1 Desire, Sexuality, and Sublimation

It is commonly said that Freud understood celibacy to be unnatural and therefore harmful to human psychological wellbeing. Many extend this to teach that exerting restraint, resisting sexual desires more generally, is similarly harmful.<sup>82</sup> Recovering asceticism requires maintaining sensitivity to constructions of basic human desires as “unnatural” and harmful.

Coakley takes up this issue in the first chapter of *The New Asceticism*. She starts by showing us that popular presentations of Freud’s thought have misrepresented his thinking about desire and sublimation. Freud, Coakley claims,

moved distinctly away from his early, and purely biological, account of “Eros” and its power for redirection. At no time, in fact, does Freud’s position provide a mandate for the view that “sublimation” is harmful – or, at any rate, any more harmful than the psychological repressions we necessarily negotiate all the time.... Freud’s later view is that if civilization is to endure we must all be engaged in forms of “sublimation”...<sup>83</sup>

What a reframe indeed! Sublimation is basic to being human. To avoid sublimation is to avoid what is essential to the human.<sup>84</sup> And even further, there is a capacity in humans to channel their internal energies in ways that are not harmful. Freud, rather than giving us an argument which calls sublimation harmful, offers instead a sense that some sublimation is necessary for civilizational success. We might now have an argument about what kinds of

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<sup>82</sup>In ‘Polyamory Works for Them,’ *The New York Times*, Aug. 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/style/polyamory-nonmonogamy-relationships.html>, Alice Hines writes that while openness to non-monogamy is growing, people involved in polyamory cite “sexual repression as the root of the wider public stigma about non-monogamy.” See also Garry Wills, “The Case Against Celibacy,” *The Boston Globe Magazine* (24 March 2002), 10-24; and A. W. Richard Sipe, *Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003).

<sup>83</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 40.

<sup>84</sup> For this part of her argument Coakley relies on the work of Herbert Marcuse, “The Transformation of Sexuality into Eros,” in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1974), 197-221.

sublimation we ought to encourage. We no longer need to be only on the side of libertinism to be on the side of psychological “health.”

Sublimation may be possible and utterly human, but what is it worth directing our eros toward? How do we do it well? Coakley invites her reader to look in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa to expose the “unfinished nature of Freud’s notion of ‘sublimation’” so that she can open new creative directions for our engagement with desire.<sup>85</sup>

Coakley proposes that we look for help in talking about desire to the writings of Gregory of Nyssa in his book “On Virginity.” According to Coakley, Gregory of Nyssa’s teachings about desire formation do not conform to modern misconceptions. Gregory writes about a vision for desire that is rightly ordered in relationship to God, but, surprisingly for many who have been taught to assume that Christian theologians will denigrate sexual pleasure, he does not argue that this right ordering requires the abandonment of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is not a source of fear for him. Sexual life or its lack is not what makes the right ordering of desire possible. “The key issue, in fact, for Gregory, is a training of desire, a life-long commitment to what we might now call the ‘long haul’ of personal, erotic transformation, and thereby of reflection on the final significance of all one’s desires before God.”<sup>86</sup> This is something that can happen within a marriage and outside of one. “A spiritually productive marriage [has] equal potential capacity, when desire is rightly ‘aimed’, to bear the fruits of *leitourgia*, ‘service’ to others, especially to the poor.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> In creating an encounter between pre-modern ascetical theology and Freud to see what the one can learn from the other, Coakley’s move is akin to that of comparative theology. This kind of enrichment between a secular ideology and a religious tradition might appear to be external to Comparative Theology, but in reality, the comprehensive quality of the secular ideology makes it an apt conversation partner for a religious tradition, one that also offers a comprehensive structuring of human experience and self-understanding for making sense of the world.

<sup>86</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 30.

<sup>87</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 50.

Coakley offers Gregory's understanding of desire's potential for formation as a source of wisdom about what we are capable of as humans. Christian practitioners of the ascetic life have a knowledge of desire and its malleability. We have ignored what they have to teach us about sublimation of desire in modernity because we misunderstood what ascetical practice was for. We assumed that all their thinking would lead to mere suppression or control of desire. Instead, what we see in Gregory of Nyssa's writings is a vision for human flourishing that can include sexual life. For Gregory, sexual desire, like all desire, is not something to fear, but something to balance. The goal is to train oneself to be a God-lover, but this does not mean a world or pleasure hater.<sup>88</sup>

Coakley recovers Gregory of Nyssa's teachings without violating the "maximal demand." Asceticism does not have to be a path to cultivating worldly hatred or mortification. We can aspire to the fulness of the Christian vision for desire while enjoying sexual life as we also learn to channel desire through spiritual practices. She calls for both a new scholarly appraisal of asceticism and a return to ascetic practices not "as *enforced* solutions to the riddle of desire,"<sup>89</sup> but as a retrieval of wisdom that can help us address the theologically challenging and urgent questions we have about desire and its relation to human life and the divine. Sometimes retrieving the past teaches us what we misunderstood and helps us get out of ways in which we've trapped our own thinking. In the next section we look at how retrieving ascetic Christian teachings can offer us a counter-cultural Christian vision for human flourishing that does not violate the "maximal demand."

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<sup>88</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 30. Coakley goes on to say that a life of celibacy or of marriage is not what is important to Gregory. Becoming a God lover is not contingent on taking up a celibate life. Gregory says the goods described can arise within marriage as well, it all depends on how *eros* is channeled. The goal, the telos of both the ascetic faithfulness to one partner in marriage and the faithfulness to vows of celibacy are for the redirection of love and desire away from worldly values and toward the service of others. External fidelity to the rules of marriage or celibacy without directing the heart misses the point. Bad marriage and bad celibacy are both bad when they do not lead to any transformation of the soul. Good marriage and good celibacy are both spiritually fruitful when they channel *eros* toward God. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 50.

<sup>89</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 26. Emphasis hers.

### 2.2.2 The Path of “Deepening Practices”<sup>90</sup>

Coakley uses a classical set of categories—purgative, illuminative, and unitive—to help describe and sort various phases of growth in the life of the ascetic. To flesh out these phases she draws on the teachings of St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215 C.E.), St. Benedict (480 – 548 C.E.), and the Carmelites, St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582 C.E.) and St. John of the Cross (1542-1591 C.E.). The ascetic path she constructs from these writings and commends engages the intellect, the spirit, and the body in alternative practices of daily living inspired by, at least at the first, the New Testament call to be formed into the image of Christ.<sup>91</sup> Though there are stages, or phases, during which a person works on perfecting certain aspects of life, the process of responding to God’s grace at each stage of the journey and the transformation of desire that takes place along the path bring about a sense of unity to the whole process. What will begin as an extrinsic practice of living like Christ deepens to to experiencing life with Christ.<sup>92</sup>

The purgative phase is launched by an initial commitment to belief through the act of baptism. It then proceeds with a new ordering of a life toward Christian virtues. The focus is on building Christian character into one’s life, structuring one’s life in a Christian manner. There is often an oppositional feeling to this stage of life and an emphasis on being different from the world, especially, Coakley says, in the practices of the rich and self-indulgent.<sup>93</sup> This is precisely where it would be easy to balk at the ascetic path. There is real potential that this kind of oppositional stance could lead to disdain for the ordinary goods of life. I

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<sup>90</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Wolf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 78-93. Republished in *The New Asceticism*, 101-127.

<sup>91</sup> Rom. 8:29

<sup>92</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 105.

<sup>93</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 111.

think it is this stage that is most often what people think of when they hear the word ascetic. St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c.215) is Coakley's example of this phase. His writings are concerned with guiding wealthy and socially privileged converts to Christianity. He is particularly concerned with encouraging them away from lifestyles of the self-indulgent rich and toward simplicity. His writing represents Christ as restraining our will, functioning like a bridle on untamed colts.<sup>94</sup> Is there a way to make sense of this phase that does not violate the "maximal demand"?

I think there is, but this is certainly tricky. Removing practices that feed the ego or are self-indulgent implies that there is a genuine problem with human selfishness at the root of each person. Purgative practices ask a person to bring consciousness to the mundane patterns of daily living. How do you spend your time? What do you feed yourself? Where do you spend your money? On what do you spend it? What do you daydream about? Whose attention are you seeking? This is the phase where a person is asked to evaluate their lifestyle and consciously interrupt the formation of desires that took place before their commitment to the ascetic life. Much of the overconsumption, harmful sexual practices, and violence of our society is a product of a social-imaginary with different visions of the good life, and our formation within that society masks our awareness of our mal-formation. We participate in behaviors antithetical to true human flourishing out of mindless habituation to certain patterns. Awareness of those patterns and their harm is a first step in the process of reforming desire. In response to becoming more aware, I might focus on creating alternate routines of life, deliberately re-allocating time and financial resources toward charity and removing certain pastimes from my life.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 113.

<sup>95</sup> In *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Group, 2008), William Cavanaugh makes concrete suggestions for how a Christian might reorder a relationship with aspects of their economic life to repair the ways we have been trained to be consumers. He writes, "Consumerism is not so much about having more but about having

This is the part of the ascetic process that recognizes the broken aspects of the human condition. Fundamental to any vision for human flourishing that fits the “maximal demand” is the requirement that it not misrepresent the whole scope of human capacities for evil and violence, lustfulness and hatred. To do so would be to bowdlerize the human condition. The purgative stage says that there are deeply broken ways that we can live our lives and that those ways of living need to be uprooted. There are things that we can do like violence, corrupt sexual practices, and gratuitous overconsumption that have no part in any version of a flourishing life. We must interrupt practices in our lives that invite us to participate in these behaviors. We need to find freedom from these mal-formed passions.

Of course, any of us could get stuck there, endlessly obsessing about smaller and smaller problems, seeking to find more complete ways to avoid “the world.” I might misapply the teaching in my zealotry and, in so doing, come to despise much of what is good and meant to be a source of delight in the world. I might also come to be overly harsh with myself or despise my needs. This would be a mistake, a mistake born out of a lack of wisdom. The ascetic path is not without peril. Coakley warns, “...this is a journey that can go seriously and palpably wrong, especially if attempted without due humility and proper reliance on other’s assistance within the ‘mystical body’ of Christ.”<sup>96</sup> An unbalanced application of these teachings could easily end up violating the “maximal demand.” This is why it is crucial that this way of life be practiced in community and with wise guidance.<sup>97</sup>

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something else...” (35). Ironically the current minimalist lifestyle movement which claims to be about freeing people from consumerism becomes another consumerist movement as influencers share their “tips” for becoming a happier version of yourself through getting rid of what you own and buying the few “right” things. See <https://www.theminimalists.com/minimalism/> for a summary of minimalism as a lifestyle. Accessed Dec. 31, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 101.

<sup>97</sup> Coakley has more to say about the important role of spiritual direction in the ascetic life in *Powers and Submissions*. In Chapters 2 and 3 she acknowledges some of the ways in which this important guidance can itself be corrupted by messages of trivialization or subordination.

Another way to avoid stumbling on the purgative path is to recall that Coakley's definition of ascetic formation says that it is a lifestyle that is "sustained by a complete vision of the Christian life and its ends."<sup>98</sup> The purgative phase is not yet the complete vision of flourishing Christian life in all its fullness. There are ends to which a Christian is called that ought to inspire and encourage attention to more than just purgation. Purgation is about becoming free from sin, from disordered desire, for the sake of being free for something else. One of the ways to avoid misapplying the purgative phase is to practice it alongside activities of what Coakley calls the illuminative phase.

This next phase is not always temporally different from the first. Coakley relies on the teachings of St. Benedict in the Benedictine Rule to explicate its ascetic practices. This phase is focused on what we are free for: activities like contemplation, scriptural meditation, sacramental observance, psalm-singing, welcoming strangers, and endurance in community living.<sup>99</sup> These are all practices that demand time, physical and emotional presence, and thoughtfulness, in short, engagement of the whole self. These practices are: cleansing, purifying, and purging; destabilizing and breaking; stretching and enlarging; or refining. The consequence is a kind of illumination of the self and her earlier beliefs, even unsettling those beliefs and reshaping them, purging them as well as purging more grasping ways of being. As Coakley writes, "When the ascetic life works, and works well, it unifies, intensifies and ultimately purifies desire in the crucible of divine love, paradoxically imparting true freedom precisely by the narrowing of choices."<sup>100</sup> Purification of love with a greater love narrows the scope for acquisitiveness and being buffeted by every trend. The time spent in meditation on scripture, prayer, or singing engages the imaginative life and the heart, purifying desire by filling up the heart with more divine love. But this purgation

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<sup>98</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 18.

<sup>99</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 115.

<sup>100</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 6.

doesn't purge the joy or delight of physical or intellectual pleasures. It doesn't demand abandoning our appreciation for and delight in the joys and comforts of the world. None of these practices are inherently life-denying, though they can be practiced in unbalanced ways. There is no fleeing from life; actually, this is an invitation to live it with a kind of fullness of awareness, with a mindful presence unknown to an average contemporary lifestyle.

The practices of the illuminative phase do not focus on keeping the world at bay, nor are they about immediately producing virtue. She notes that all these are "mapped out" in the Benedictine rule "so that nothing will be [too] harsh or burdensome."<sup>101</sup> The spirit in which they are done is slow and steady. These acts of training in love are meant to accompany a person all their life. These are practices that have a qualitative and more vague goal than what we found in the purgative phase, namely, "so that we shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God's commandments..."<sup>102</sup> The expectation is that this way of living changes the inner life of the Christian. The desires of their heart become sweetened such that God's commandments are a source of loving delight.

Coakley describes the experience of perception shifting as a key component of this formation. Perseverance in these practices leads to finding Christ in new and unexpected places – in the beggar at the door, in our own spiritual endurance and suffering, and in postures of service.<sup>103</sup> In contrast to the purgative phase where Christ is experienced as an

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<sup>101</sup> *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Justin McCann (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970), prologue,4. Quoted by Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 115.

<sup>102</sup> *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Justin McCann (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970), ch. 7,17, quoted by Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 115.

<sup>103</sup> In Ross Douthat's book, *The Deep Places: A Memoir of Illness and Discovery* (Convergent Books, 2021), the author explores his learnings from his long illness with Lyme disease as an *affliction* like that defined by Simone Weil as "pain, distress of soul, and social degradation." He reflects on the ways in which our culture offers no preparation for endurance of pain, about the suffering of the body, except to teach us how to avoid it. I think it is profoundly important that Coakley includes our own endurance of suffering in this list, bringing to consciousness something we would all rather forget: that degradation of the body is never avoidable, except by a hasty death. I think that making space for physical suffering that can't be avoided as part of illumination, as we see it here in this list is

instructor, Christ in this phase is found in acts of service.<sup>104</sup> Coakley notes that Christian practices, be they meditative, sacramental or moral, all lead to finding Christ “in the entirely unromantic other, in the exhausting poverty of my neighbor, in the nuisance of the beggar at my gate.”<sup>105</sup> There is a purgation here also, a purging of prideful judgements about class and status, for example. Illumination and purgation operate together in cultivating a vision of human flourishing. There is no hatred of the ordinary in this ascetic path; there is not even irritation at the ordinary boring daily stresses. There is instead an embrace of the ordinary and the mundane in an even more perfect expression because the practices of this path amplify the capacity for love within the practitioner. Far from seeking to abandon the vulnerable reality of human existence, this phase of the ascetic life is about finding a renewed significance in the particular, flawed, human beings that find us in our daily lives. In Nussbaum’s critique of the ascetic Christian life, at the root of a desire for God is a desire to transcend our limitations, our finitude, our neediness, and fallibility. In Coakley’s description, ascetic life does not seek to leave behind the mundane, nor dispense with relationships; instead it is a life lived with more radical openheartedness to the needy. Rather than fleeing vulnerability, it is a way of living that is no longer afraid. “Do not be afraid” does not mean nothing bad will happen. It means you don’t need to be afraid of it.

The last phase of the ascetic life is unitive. Coakley describes it as the incorporation of the self into the life of the Trinity. She looks to the writings of the Carmelites Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross as exemplars of this unitive state. Coakley notices two different

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perhaps one of the most respectful and life honoring ways we can respond to suffering we cannot change. But while we might seek to add to our daily routine psalm-singing or other goods, adding physical suffering is not something that I believe is appropriate and certainly is not a practice that is justifiable in light of the “maximal demand.” Part of a return to the ordinary and to the goodness of the body implies a willingness to embrace and honor the experiences of the body at all of its stages at the times when we feel physical delight and when we suffer.

<sup>104</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 115.

<sup>105</sup> Sarah Coakley, “The Identity of the Risen Jesus,” in *Seeking the Identity of the Risen Jesus*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hayes (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 316.

experiences in the writings of Teresa of Avila. When discussing the early stage in Teresa's life, she describes the unitive encounter as "brief, ecstatic, physically disabling, and not marked by recognition of doctrinal content – in short, 'experiences' of the sort now misleadingly termed 'mystical' in the falsely psychologized modern sense."<sup>106</sup> But later, Coakley summarizes Teresa's account of the unitive life in *Mansions* this way:

...it is a higher state to be able to withstand lasting union without physical ecstasy or collapse, and the acknowledgement of the trinitarian element is a concomitant feature of that more exalted position. The return to the quotidian, to "the pots and pans" of the kitchen, is incarnationally required of the one who passes into this union; any flight from the "ordinary," and thus from the continuing round of bodily "practices" in community which mark its Christian shape, would be a denial of the very trinitarian revelation just vouchsafed.<sup>107</sup>

This second description of union is a state of ever-growing intimacy with God. It fits with the goal of a vision for human flourishing that doesn't violate the "maximal demand." It doesn't lead to abandonment of the everyday nor of the particular. The Christian shape of a person's daily life isn't transcended, nor do we see a disgust for the body, or that which is fleeting. We see instead a kind of altered way of being in the world, not an escape from it.<sup>108</sup>

Coakley also offers St. John of the Cross's reflections, adding another layer to our image of the way of being in the world that these ascetic practices make possible. Union for St. John of the Cross is described as "breathing with the Spirit of God that moves between the Father and Son." The union brings about a sense of total integration of the self and love of God. She quotes St. John of the Cross,

And thus the soul loves God in the Holy Spirit together with the Holy Spirit, not by means of Him, as by an instrument, but together with Him, by reason of the transformation... and He supplies that which she lacks by her having been transformed in Love with Him.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 120.

<sup>107</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 120.

<sup>108</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1957), ch. 18. Cited by Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 120.

<sup>109</sup> John of the Cross, 'The Spiritual Canticle', stanza 37, in *The Complete Works of John of the Cross*, trans. E. A. Peers (London: Burns and Oates, 1965), vol. 2, 165, quoted by Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 121.

The union described here is of authentic shared love, not a loss of self, and not a grasping self. One of the worries expressed by Nussbaum is that ascetic life teaches us to despise the human condition and to seek to abandon our human nature. But this vision of a flourishing Christian life does not include a loss of self or abandonment of our humanity. Participating in the flow of love between the Trinity, empowers the specific life, and places that life into a relationship that is about both receiving and giving at the same time, both active and passive.

Coakley is adamant that we should not assume these phases are unidirectional. From her reading of the sources, these phases build on one another, and one can go back and forth between them, never discarding the earlier stages as others are reached.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, some goods are not accomplished without a full flowering of all three stages.

Only at the third “level” ... do deepened theological insights (re-minted as “beliefs”) arise that are available *only* through prolonged engagement in “practices.” These insights could not have been gained by a merely intellectual short-cut, however sharp or brilliant. They are *founded* in “practices,” supremely in the practice of infused contemplation, being effects of a life of multiple forms of faithfulness, forging the participants by degrees in to “the image of his Son” (see Rom. 8:29).<sup>111</sup>

The goods of a life lived in relationship to ascetic practice can’t be shortcut. It is long term work. There is a qualitative difference in the intellectual life of a person formed by ascetic practices directed toward a complete vision of a Christian life, described here as being forged in to “the image of his Son.” Practices of the mind, the heart, and the body lead to reformation of the intellect and the passions that can’t be gotten to through intellectual learning alone. No one phase can be judged entirely separate from another, the faithfulness expressed in each is crucial for the whole, and while the language here focuses on the

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<sup>110</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 104.

<sup>111</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 104.

intellectual change in the final stage, the intellect is just one part of what is being formed through these practices.

The spiritual guides we have looked at with Coakley's help illuminate some of the dynamics of Christian ascetic formation. We also have been brought to them by a sensitive reader, informed by the concerns of our own time, and by her own experience with these practices. Coakley doesn't just grab the past and bring it forward. She displays great wisdom in using her recovered texts to challenge the contemporary moment with an invitation to build high aspirations, while also bringing to bear the concerns of our own time on her selection process. Other sensitive well-informed readers might choose to package these teachings with a different nuance, and I believe that is precisely the point. Rather than defining what we must learn from the ascetics of the past, Coakley is demonstrating that we can still learn and that what is available to us ought to be treasured and will help the current needs facing a crisis of purposelessness.

Before we move ahead to look at examples of Christian liturgical asceticism, I want to look closely at the way that Coakley presents Christian contemplation. We will see even more deeply in her presentation the kind of sensitivity needed to recover ascetic practices for our contemporary world. In this final section of learning from Coakley I will show how attentiveness to this prayer practice can teach us about the "ends" that Christian ascetic life makes possible.

### **2.2.3 The Practice of Christian Contemplation**

Recall that Coakley's definition of the new asceticism includes "a sustaining vision of Christian life and its ends." One sustaining vision might be described as the unitive mystical one summarized above in the writings of the Carmelites St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of

the Cross. Another could be articulated as participation in the extended life of Christ through the church. Coakley points to the life of the twentieth-century Anglican priest, Father W. H. Vanstone, as exemplifying this expression of Christian fulfillment. For Vanstone the experience was “one of being ‘like God [in Christ] ... handed over to the world, to wait up on it, to receive its power of meaning.”<sup>112</sup> The posture is one of embracing through his life with his entire being the ongoing ministry of Christ. In either vision for a flourishing Christian life, Coakley says that the practice of contemplation is particularly important because it has a lot to teach about the proper balance of power and vulnerability, about giving and receiving. In the case of this practice, Coakley not only draws on other’s teachings about the practice but also personally testifies to it as both transformational and empowering.<sup>113</sup> She witnesses to it as particularly transformative in the process of internalizing the kind of humble posture of *kenosis*,<sup>114</sup> but in a way that is not abusive.

Contemplation is a mode of prayer, a posture of waiting on God. It can take a number of different forms, Quaker attentiveness, charismatic expression, chant, and silence. According to Coakley these contemplative modes of prayer open up a space in which the person praying does not set the agenda, making space to allow God to be God.<sup>115</sup> It is a “space-making” exercise that Coakley distinguishes from “meditation” on Biblical texts, a more discursive activity. This is a practice that makes space for whatever comes. It, in her words, “court(s) the unconscious and summon(s) into new attentiveness those dimensions of human response which go beyond the verbal or the propositional.”<sup>116</sup> The disarmed self

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<sup>112</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 110, quotes W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, 115.

<sup>113</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 39.

<sup>114</sup> “[T]he avoidance of all ‘snatching’ from the outset, involves an ascetical commitment of some subtlety, a regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine. The rhythm of this *askesis* is already inscribed ritually and symbolically in the sacraments of baptism and eucharist; but in prayer (especially the defenseless prayer of silent waiting on God) it is ‘internalized’ over time in a peculiarly demanding and transformative fashion.” Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 34.

<sup>115</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 34.

<sup>116</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 88.

is present, waiting on God in a manner where “snatching” is absent. She describes it also as a “ceding and responding”<sup>117</sup> to God within this one activity of silent waiting.

She says that this practice is one of deep vulnerability, but, with keen sensitivity to feminist concerns, she takes the time to address how this kind of vulnerability is not an opening of the self to be battered because it is an opening to the presence of God—God, the One who doesn’t shout, force or obliterate. I appreciate the sensitivity here to how vulnerability sounds to a variety of readers. The care she takes to describe God’s presence as one who never forces is a reminder that sometimes the God we imagine, the God we think we know, is not God. The God she speaks of here is the One who speaks by a קול דממה דקה, the One whose speaking is as the daughter of an echo.<sup>118</sup> In Elijah’s story there was wind and earthquake and fire, but God’s voice was not in any one of these voluble happenings.<sup>119</sup> Coakley reminds us that we are becoming vulnerable in the presence of one who would never abuse power.

She goes on to add that contemplative practice is not one of self-harm, nor a practice of unnecessary suffering. It is also not a practice of self-abnegation. All these are clearly concerns about or objections to the posture she describes, coming from people concerned about oppression and/or what Taylor described as the value of the ordinary. Coakley says that contemplation is not like that, but she is also very honest: the practice is not painless. She even warns that it does lead to the birthing of a new self, which cannot be painless. She says that sudden awareness can come when the disarmed self contacts the all-seeing presence of God. That moment can hurt.<sup>120</sup> Coakley tells us, it is not the kind of hurt that

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<sup>117</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 34.

<sup>118</sup> 1 Kings 19:12. Translation mine. Translated by the KJV as “still small voice,” this phrase has entered Christian parlance as a way of speaking about what it is like to hear the voice of God in daily life.

<sup>119</sup> 1 Kings 19:11-13

<sup>120</sup> Coakley offers a description of this moment in psychological terms, as “the dangers of too-sudden uprush of material from the unconscious... are not inconsiderable.” *Powers and Submissions*, 35.

comes from an experience of oppression or destruction. It is empowering and transformational.<sup>121</sup> The fruit of the practice she describes as the Pauline fruits of the spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,”<sup>122</sup> along with the feminist virtues of “personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry.”<sup>123</sup> Contemplation invites people into a transformational process that will change their way of inhabiting their power. “[T]his special ‘self-emptying’ is not a negation of self, but the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God.”<sup>124</sup> Coakley commends contemplative practice, especially wordless prayer, because it opens up the possibility of a true discovery of power in vulnerability through “willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence which far from ‘complementing’ masculinity, acts as its undoing.”<sup>125</sup> Coakley teaches contemplative practice as a way of coming to inhabit the paradoxical New Testament truth that we should “lose our life in order to save it.”<sup>126</sup>

Her descriptions of the fruits of this practice, a life lived with abandon, curiosity, self-love, etc. embrace language both ancient and contemporary. Feminist theologians rightly worry that women in the church have too often heard the “fruits of the spirit” as calls to a misunderstood humility, a kind of smallness of self. She sees in contemplative practice a tutor for a Christian ethic in which one learns to be a true imitator of Christ. She describes that selfhood in a variety of places as a way of living with abandon, curiosity, self-love, and fullness, simultaneously making space and never forcing. The virtues she names are not gendered and are not for people of one class or another. They are virtues that reflect

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<sup>121</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 39.

<sup>122</sup> Gal. 5:22-23.

<sup>123</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 39.

<sup>124</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 36.

<sup>125</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 37.

<sup>126</sup> Matt. 16:26.

concerns of our particular moment in human history, they use the language of human flourishing that fits the ideals of our time. But they go beyond them as well. Her description of the fruits of contemplation is enriched by the continued presence of the traditional language and by the ultimate understanding that contemplative prayer both leads to a greater capacity for living and to a greater capacity for self-giving. Even if some of her language would be strange to the ears of ancient practitioners, her description of self-formation would be familiar. Coakley's presentation of the ends of a flourishing Christian life can be understood as an articulation of the "maximal demand" for the banker and the housekeeper, the man and the woman, the ancient and the modern.

Through her teaching both on contemplation and the phases of ascetic life, Coakley articulates a deeply traditional Christian vision for human flourishing, taking up the self-emptying way of Christ, while helping us to understand that self-emptying rightly. She points out the way that the path of *kenosis* can be misunderstood but also how it can work to repair the brokenness of our society caused by its obsessive attentiveness to power. Coakley's approach to this conversation aligns discourse about desire formation and the ascetic with the aspirations of scholarly camps that might be expected to be suspicious of her recovery of pre-modern religious practices. But her approach volunteers these practices as a contribution to feminist and post-colonial projects, not as a rejection of them.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> In *Powers and Submissions*, xvii, Coakley points out that our secular age is lacking in practices that can help train humans to accomplish the kind of ethical standards beloved by post-colonial theorists. "Attending to the otherness of the other" isn't something that just comes naturally or easily to humans. Actually, it is an incredibly high ethical standard. If we don't have ways of training ourselves in the virtues necessary to accomplish it, we should not expect success merely through shouting. See Sarah Coakley, "Why Gift? Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 2 (2008): 224-235; Sarah Coakley, "Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task," *Criterion* 47, no. 1 (2009): 2-11, 6-7, 11n2. This insight is widely shared and remarked on by other scholars who work in this field of ethical formation. See, for example, Annette Pierdziwol, "The 'How' of Transformation in Levinas and Coakley" in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology*, ed. Janice McRandal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 34, who writes, "The deep restructuring of our perceptual apparatus can't be an achievement of thought and will alone – the produce of a one-off decision or moment of insight – but rather happens only via a patient disciplining of the self that cannot circumvent the body."

Coakley's new asceticism shifts the conversation. It is not just religious moral demands that are potentially harmful to normal human flourishing. We are in desperate need of new ways out of the impasses in our thinking about power and ethics. We are in need of more skillful ways of living with one another. Properly practiced, the ascetic path overturns all abusive uses of power, whether in ourselves or in others.

### 2.3 EVALUATING COAKLEY'S NEW ASCETICISM

Taylor, in defining the "maximal demand," wrote that we need to "define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity."<sup>128</sup> How well does Coakley's new asceticism challenge us without mutilating human life with its simple joys? I think Coakley is successful, but could be more so.

I want to begin by appreciating what Coakley's writings on the ascetic do very well. She does not mortify the body or the human condition with her vision for human flourishing. She talks about desire as a complex and challenging aspect of life without making the body the problem. She never champions the transcendence of the body or the domination of the body by the mind. She teaches that there is no necessary conflict between desire for God and sexual life. Coakley invites us to learn from Gregory of Nyssa how desire is not something to fear but rather something to grow as it is channeled toward its ultimate satisfaction in God.<sup>129</sup> The longing for transcendence in the unitive vision of Christian life imagines an intensification of love and desire, not the diminishment of desire. She

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<sup>128</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 640.

<sup>129</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 48-51.

articulates an ethical demand that is comfortable with vulnerability, even, one might say, defined by it. The way of *kenotic* love is certainly not a path of avoidance of human frailty. It is a path of intensification of desire and love, finding what is most deeply significant in what is frail and broken.

Coakley has not scaled back the vision for the ideal, nor does she pretend that humans are naturally able to attain to the Christian ideal. She speaks regularly about perseverance and faithfulness to the practices of the faith as crucial for attaining the Christian calling.

Finally, Coakley's new asceticism addresses genuine needs of our time. We need to avoid a "busy pragmatism" that thinks it can go straight to working to accomplish justice without training in the delicate act of attending to the other. The training in discernment that is the ascetic path is needed to do the work of justice. It should be pursued with equal vigor as the disciplining of institutions. Coakley doesn't want us to stop working on institutional change; she wants us to do it while attending to the Christian virtue cultivation that trains the doer in patient expectation, fearless vulnerability, courage, generosity, self-control, etc. She has certainly not set her standards too low. Coakley offers the intentional practice of contemplation, along with other embodied sacramental practices, as pragmatic means for enabling and sustaining the lofty ethical standards of post-colonial and feminist theories.<sup>130</sup>

Overall, reading Coakley, I hear her maintain a rigorous ethical demand on all of us that is consistent with Turner's "maximal demand." We are all responsible for the ways in which we use our power. It is not just one class or group that is responsible. We are all

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<sup>130</sup> I am following the work of Annette Pierdziwol with these observations which she published in "Transformation in Levinas and Coakley" in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology*, ed. Janice McRandal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 16. In that text she cites Sarah Coakley, "Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?: On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task," *Criterion* 47, no. 1 (2009): 6.

responsible. Thus along with learning to build power so as to discipline institutions, we need to learn to find the power we have to discipline ourselves.<sup>131</sup> This kind of training is not about submitting but instead about cultivating “a response to the divine allure that allows one to meet the ambiguous forms of ‘worldly’ power in a new dimension, neither decrying them *in se* nor being enslaved to them, but rather facing, embracing, resisting or deflecting them with discernment.”<sup>132</sup> This moral call demonstrates Coakley’s attentiveness to the ethical predicament we find ourselves in as humans. Human persons are neither totally constrained by their circumstances and formed by the social-political environment, nor totally independent agents, only suffering when their own sins are the cause. The human condition is one that is in need of formation to even approximate our ethical aspirations. Coakley engages deeply with the urgency of now while also encouraging us to the lifetime work of formation of desire, the intellect, and the body. In so doing, she neither ignores the reality of the present moment, nor misses a holistic vision of the human condition. Her ascetic call fulfills Taylor’s maximal demand, inviting us into a lifelong dance with God, urging us to take up, along with the work of repairing the world, the essential work of repairing ourselves.

Coakley’s definition of the ascetic, as I said above, recognizes the ongoing and long-term nature of the transformative path. Her lack of hastiness is good protection from the crushing or mutilating of the self that an ascetic path of human flourishing must avoid. Like the taking up of a particularly stringent fad diet to get quick results, impatience for results could lead a person to overzealous applications of ascetic practices. A marathon runner may

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<sup>131</sup> An important implication of this way of thinking is that our intellectual life in the secular academy may be limited by our habits. Our thoughts about things like beliefs are not separate from the physical habits we have which form our imaginative world and our emotional life. Talal Asad in his “Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48, notices this and suggests that “unbelief can be more truly the effect of untaught bodies than of uninstructed minds.”

<sup>132</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, xviii.

successfully run a marathon, but the training to be a marathon runner never ends, until the person decides to stop being a runner. That ends the career of the runner. The Christian is called to live as a Christian for their whole life. There is no completing the task, at least not in this life.<sup>133</sup>

My reservation with Coakley's work is that she does not focus on the practices of the church which include explicit enjoyment of embodied desires. I do not think that her teachings violate the "maximal demand," but I think that the new asceticism would be enriched if she were to do further work on the role of ordinary human fulfillments in the process of attaining to the flourishing life she describes. For example, Coakley says that sexual life does not have to get in the way of the ascetic life, but she does not speak of the goodness of sexual desire and the ways in which the Christian sacrament of marriage clearly indicates its value. In her summary of the phases of ascetic life I wish she would have spoken about the relationship of those practices to the keeping of the Christian feasts. Faithful practice of Christian life according to the ecclesiastical calendar requires times of feasting and leisure. I would have liked to hear Coakley talk about what the feast days can teach us about the appropriate cultivation of desire. The church has rituals for celebrating important moments in ordinary life, like, for example welcoming the birth of a child. What can we learn about desire from these celebratory moments? Coakley mentions the practice of "perseverance in community." The kind of communal life to which a Christian is called is certainly an ascetic practice calling for a lot of ego-transcendence'.<sup>134</sup> Communal life is also a

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<sup>133</sup> I find it fascinating that, in the Catholic tradition of purgatory, the transformational process toward the ends of a Christian life do not have to be completed in this life. For a compelling literary presentation of this idea see J. R. R. Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle," *The Dublin Review*, v.216-17 (January 1945): 46-61, which is said to parallel Dante Alighieri's "Purgatorio," *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1949). In Dante's story the process of Purgatory is the continuation of the purification of desire for God, preparing the soul to encounter the Divine presence.

<sup>134</sup> For an example of a theology that reflects deeply on the formative (ascetic) challenge of living with others see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Brothers), 1954.

source of great support and comfort. Living with others gives us more opportunities to celebrate life, to share in simple ordinary joys, like baby showers, weddings, and birthdays. One might assume that delight in the ordinary can sustain itself. It is easy to presume that delicious food, sexual satisfaction, celebration, the enjoyment of friendship, will all be naturally sustained in the Christian's life because these are all delightful aspects of life. But I think it is not safe to make this assumption. It is too easy for the pious to focus all their attention on the path of desire formation as articulated by Coakley and forget the importance of celebrating the journey and leading to a distortion in our appreciation for ordinary delights. An asceticism for our time needs more thinking about how these elements of life are part of the right ordering of desire.

Coakley's new asceticism invites a new encounter with ascetic formation with a truly inspiring vision of the Christian ends toward which an ascetic life is directed. Her vision of a flourishing human life is not "scaled back" and her understanding of the human condition does not hide from the "full power of sensuality and aggression."<sup>135</sup> Her prescription for practice recognizes the need for dedication to being formed, the need for genuine practices that create greater awareness of sin and redirect desire. The new asceticism she offers is an excellent example of a vision for human flourishing that is relevant to our time and that fulfills Taylor's "maximal demand." Yet, in the area of celebration of the ordinary, I think her new asceticism needs further development.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 641. "The combined accusation is: you have conceived our highest aspirations in such a way that to realize them you will have to mutilate human (the mortifying approach); so naturally, you are induced surreptitiously to scale down your demands, and also to hide from yourselves the full power of human sensuality and aggression, so that ordinary and redeemed humanity can be brought within hailing range of each other – you thus merit the bowdlerizing reproach."

<sup>136</sup> A very recent contribution to the idea of celebrating the ordinary in Christian life is Tish Harrison Warren's book *The Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016). Another recent book on delighting in the goods of life by finding sacred rest is Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives* (New York: Random House Publishing: 1999). Also see Walter Bruggeman, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2017).

## 2.4 CONCLUSION

In our time there is an urgent need for ascetic practices and a vision for human flourishing that can offer new ways forward for our culture. A new conversation about desire formation can speak to a variety of issues we face today, from the need to create people capable of embodying the ethical calls for justice and empowerment of the oppressed without creating new structures of abuse, to the epidemic of desperate purposelessness experienced by so many.<sup>137</sup> Christian asceticism can be reclaimed and used to articulate a maximal demand, at least for Christians. This new asceticism is a path of piety, desire transformation, dedication to religious practice, and embrace of vulnerability and openness to a genuine encounter with God. It cannot be a simplistic one that doesn't grapple with the full power of human sensuality and aggression, nor can it be one that seeks

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<sup>137</sup> An opioid crisis in America is unfolding as I write this dissertation. It is notoriously difficult to get perspective on events as they unfold. It is certainly a complex crisis. And there is reason to suspect that one of the root causes is the increase of despair among the population hurt most by this pandemic. That despair has been linked to "the decline of the working class, the erosion of families, communities, and social capital, and an inadequate public health care system." Changes brought about by trade liberalization in a variety of industries created the economic conditions for a decline in family stability and community stability, leading to a hopelessness about the future. Carol Graham, "Understanding the Role of Despair in America's Opioid Crisis," *The Brookings Institute* (October, 15 2019), writes:

Sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University has extensively interviewed children of steelworkers from the now-defunct Bethlehem Steel complex in Baltimore. While African American steelworkers faced significant discrimination, many of their children attended college and moved to better neighborhoods. Yet they return most weeks to the church near the factory and reap the psychological benefit of giving back to their community. The children of the white steelworkers tended not to go to college and remain in the same neighborhood as their parents, but with inferior jobs. While this is not a large sample study, it is surely a very telling one

The loss of a meaningful role in the ecosystem of a family, the lack of success building lives of mutual care and support, the loss of communal connections, are just some of the problems gestured at by these studies. For more on this topic see, Justine Pierce and Peter Schott, "Trade Liberalization and Mortality: Evidence from U.S. Counties," *National Bureau of Economic Research* (2016), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22849> and Andrew J. Cherlin, *Love's Labors Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class Family* (New York: The Russel Sage Foundation, 2014). For other approaches to these problems, see Charles Murry, *Coming Apart: The State of White America* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012); J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2018).

to oppress and destroy desire, nor one that is self-destructive seeking to abandon the human condition. To make sure it remains that way, we should measure any discourse seeking to participate in a new asceticism by the standards articulated by Charles Taylor. There must be a high ideal, but we must offer a path toward that ideal that does “not crush, mutilate, or deny anything essential to our humanity.”<sup>138</sup> Coakley’s attentiveness to critiques of asceticism from feminists, and her clear-eyed ability to affirm their concerns while still seeing the value in retrieving Christian practices as the locus for the formation of contemporary men and women, commends her definition of asceticism. Coakley’s definition of asceticism offers a model of formation that respects every aspect of the human person, fulfilling the challenge of Taylor’s “maximal demand.” There is no abandonment of our humanity in the vision of human excellence offered here. It is a vision that is also not unrealistic about the scope of the project. The goal is only attained through lifelong practice. There is no rushing the project. The wise person taking up these practices modulates their pace, running at a pace that is sustainable for a lifetime. Coakley’s presentation of different developmental stages in the process of achieving the Christian end of participation in the flow of the divine life demonstrates that there can be variability in the range of Christian ends sought. St. Benedict didn’t get it wrong when he taught others a path of illumination. There doesn’t have to even be a hierarchy or a presumed process of growth from one phase to another. But the goals and the means must bring about deeper participation in the Christian life.

Moving forward, I will use Coakley’s definition of asceticism as a model for my own account of a Jewish asceticism grounded in the recovery of a Jewish theological anthropology and of Musar practices, applied to Jewish liturgical worship. As I offer a way of

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<sup>138</sup> This is the standard that Taylor set for defining the boundaries of any articulation of our highest ethical ideals. That vision must not imagine us to need to abandon our humanity. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 640.

thinking about the Jewish practice of prayer as ascetic, I will keep in mind the danger of being overly optimistic about the human condition and of being overly excited to abandon it. Coakley's definition of asceticism brings sensitivity to the project of formation in religious excellence as an embodied, transformational, committed, and lifelong pursuit of living in the presence of God. Bringing these sensitivities articulated by both Taylor and Coakley to the project frames the work of self-formation within a helpful cocoon of appreciation for the profound gains made in how to talk about asceticism today offered by a century of critique of the ascetic life.

### 3.0 A STUDY OF TWO METHODS OF CHRISTIAN LITURGICAL ASCETICISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A HYBRID MODEL

The new asceticism that Coakley advances invites a recovery of Christian practices motivated by a vision of human flourishing rooted in a Christian *telos*. One of the practices of the church that, at least in many quarters, remains very present in the life of the people is liturgical prayer.<sup>1</sup> Liturgical prayer, a formal practice of public communal worship as distinct from private prayer and devotional exercises,<sup>2</sup> is one of the ancient practices of the church. It is at the heart of what Christians do when they gather. This sets it apart from other forms of ascetic practice which are less present to the current way of life of so many of the members of the church. Building on Coakley's encouragement to rediscover asceticism, and the societal need I wrote about in the previous chapter to go beyond blithely stated ideals toward training in the capacities for a moral life,<sup>3</sup> I suggest we look to liturgical prayer, a practice in which many lay religious people already participate, and ask what it

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<sup>1</sup> This is a common Christian practice that can no longer be described as elitist after the reforms of the Liturgical Movement of the nineteenth century which impacted Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist churches and garnered a greater role for the laity in the liturgical life of the community. See Frank Senn, "Four Liturgical Movements: Restoration, Renewal, Revival, Retrieval," *Liturgy* 19:4 (2004): 69-80, for more on the ongoing impact of that movement also within other protestant churches including megachurches. According to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14 the congregation's "full, conscious and active participation" in liturgical prayer is supposed to be promoted by pastors and understood to be the "primary and indispensable source from which they are to derive the true Christian spirit." See Tom Elich, "Full, Conscious and Active Participation," in *Vatican Council II: Reforming Liturgy*, ed. Elizabeth Harrington, David Orr, Carmel Pilcher (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Theology Adelaide, 2013), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Joris Geldhof, "Liturgical Theology," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Religion* (Oxford University Press, published online, March 2015), 2 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.14>.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor summarizes much of our debate in modern culture as turning on "rival notions of fullness" and on disagreements about our "ethical predicament." *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 604. He argues for the need to articulate a vision for human flourishing that does not denigrate the human condition, nor does it ignore the real depths of viciousness of which humans are capable. A vision of fullness that can do that, he calls the "maximal demand." I argued in the last chapter that Sarah Coakley's new asceticism goes a long way in fulfilling the "maximal demand," and thereby in creating a much-needed approach to capacitating people for the ethical challenges we face.

has to offer as a locus for ascetic formation. How might we rediscover this practice were we to reflect on it as an ascetic act of desire formation? The two guides for this inquiry are the Catholic liturgical theologian David Fagerberg and the Presbyterian theologian James K. A. Smith. Each illuminate different elements of the study of liturgy as an ascetic act.

Fagerberg's work introduces a method for the study of liturgical life known as liturgical theology and explains the importance of asceticism for understanding liturgy. Smith's work adds insight into some of the desire forming mechanisms within the act of liturgical prayer. When brought together with Coakley's definition of asceticism, as I do at the end of this chapter, these different approaches to liturgical formation become the model for my own inquiry into this topic in a Jewish key.

### **3.1 FAGERBERG: DEFINING A SCOPE OF INQUIRY**

In 2013, David Fagerberg, a Catholic theologian and professor of liturgical theology at Notre Dame, published *On Liturgical Asceticism*, a book that explores the interrelations between liturgy, theology, and asceticism. There, he brought desire formation front and center into the study of liturgical theology.

The field of liturgical theology has an expansive way of thinking about liturgy as both the work of the people in service of God and the work of God in communicating divine revelation to the people.<sup>4</sup> Liturgical theology as a method approaches liturgy not merely as the study of texts collected in a book that the church happens to use at a particular moment

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<sup>4</sup> The first sense of liturgy, the work of the people, is what it means in its classical sense, a work done on behalf of the whole people, a public service. See Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 11. The second sense, the work of God, or the revelatory aspect is intellectual content, how God sees us and the world. It is also formative in the ascetic sense, going beyond the merely intellectual, because it is a moment of encounter with God. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 9.

as its prayer book.<sup>5</sup> Liturgical theology is the study of the meaning and efficaciousness of liturgical practice.<sup>6</sup> It thinks about liturgy as constitutive of what Christians do as Christians. Liturgy is a verb, the activity of the people of God.<sup>7</sup>

Fagerberg wants to remove the liturgy from being an object of reflection and instead to consider it as a formative activity. It is an act that capacitates the faithful to encounter themselves, God, and the world in new ways. He uses an analogy to the tongue.

You can't taste your tongue. Why not? Because it is the organ by which you taste other things. You can't celebrate liturgy. Why not? Because it is the organ by which we celebrate the Kingdom of God. Liturgical time, then, is only partially understood by an anthropological study of human festival, because festival is how the eighth day is celebrated. Liturgical space, then, is not first a history of architecture, it is the nine square yards in front of the burning bush. Liturgical assembly, then, is only partially understood by sociology, for it is the body of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Just as the tongue cannot be tasted, it can only do the tasting, the liturgical life of Christians cannot be fully understood abstracted from the living of it. This is an approach to liturgy

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<sup>5</sup> My approach to the study of liturgy is not bothered by the historical claim that contingency and power dynamics have played a role in the selection of liturgical texts, because I am interested in describing what is at stake when the community prays together the words that they currently pray. I am describing the formation of their heart (asceticism) and mind (theology). And those words, no matter how they came to be there, are a way that a people hear from God, are formed by God, and offer their service to God. For more insight into the contingency and power dynamics that went into the formation of Christian liturgy see, Maxwell E. Johnson, *Praying and Believing in Early Christianity: The Interplay between Christian Worship and Doctrine* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Liturgical Theology as a discipline comes out of a conversation of the nineteenth-century Liturgical Movement which offers a helpful definition of liturgy. Dom Lambert Beauduin defined the liturgy as the ongoing activity of "the Church at prayer." The Church meant here is the communion of the saints and the current community of the faithful gathered at a time and place for the activity of prayer structured by liturgical texts. The object of study is not individual prayer. It is the praying community guided by the structured conversation with God that is found in liturgical texts. See Joris Geldhof, "Liturgical Theology" 2. We will see below that James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), will expand the application of this word "liturgy" to "rituals of ultimate concern." He will say that these rituals can be found in secular as well as religious space, pointing to shopping centers and sports arenas as spaces where people are enculturated by stories and practices that teach them what to love. David Fagerberg reflects on this difference in Smith's approach in his review of "*Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* by James K. A. Smith (review)," *Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal* 14, no. 2 (2010): 238-240.

<sup>7</sup> David W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 203.

that is thoroughly theological, an approach that presumes that belief matters for studying liturgy. In trying to think about Christian liturgical life using the tools of architecture or sociology or ritual studies or anthropology, a scholar is trying to taste their tongue instead of tasting the life of the body of Christ through the liturgy.

The liturgical theologian might use tools learned from ritual studies, history, or anthropology, but there must always be an understanding that liturgical theology isn't any one of these disciplines; it is theology. Fagerberg cites Alexander Schmemmann who taught, "liturgical theology... is not about liturgy but about theology, i.e. about the faith of the Church as expressed, communicated and preserved by the liturgy."<sup>9</sup> The theology of the Church is found in the liturgy, but not in some complete way. Fagerberg's claim is that the liturgy is normative for theology, but not that it is the source of all theology. To properly approach the work of liturgical theology, one must not use the liturgy to investigate theories of worship, nor merely study the history of liturgy in general. The work of liturgical theology can include historical analysis, the investigation of liturgical structure and evolution, but it continues after that point to a consideration of the theological meaning found in the deeper structure of the act of worship.<sup>10</sup> According to Fagerberg, "Liturgy is not an expression of how people see things; rather it proposes, instead, how God sees all people. Liturgy in its thin sense is an expression of how we see God; liturgy in its thick sense is an expression of how God sees us."<sup>11</sup> This approach implies that liturgical theology is interested in understanding the liturgy as an expression of God's vision. The liturgy becomes an act of encounter with the transformative power of divine revelation.

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform," *St. Vladimir's Quarterly* 13 (No. 4, 1969) 128, quoted by Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 74.

<sup>10</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 9.

Fagerberg calls the liturgy “faith’s grammar in action,” the faith of a community preserved in the law of prayer (*lex orandi*).<sup>12</sup> As people pray their communal liturgies, they use the language of their faith; they speak theologically.<sup>13</sup> A group of individuals become the Church in prayer, calling one another to live the testimony of Christ and His kingdom.<sup>14</sup> By praying the liturgy they join their minds and their hearts to its words and are transformed into the Church.

Fagerberg’s approach to liturgical theology carries on the work of the Schmemmann-Kavanaugh school.<sup>15</sup> In *On Liturgical Asceticism* Fagerberg sets for himself the task of making explicit something that he believes was already implicit in their work, namely the centrality of ascetic formation to liturgical theology.<sup>16</sup> Fagerberg credits Schmemmann with directing the study of liturgy toward investigating it as the public act of the Church in order “to explain how the Church expresses and fulfills herself in this act.”<sup>17</sup> The goal of this method is to study liturgy not as a secondary expression of faith, what *people* think about God, but as

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<sup>12</sup> Joris Geldhof, “Liturgical Theology,” 1.

<sup>13</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 3-4. Fagerberg is particularly concerned with the lack of attentiveness in Christian theology to the embodied practice of the liturgy as the locus for the formation of theologians. He argues, liturgical life is at the very heart of what it means to “be” a Christian and hence a Christian theologian. Fagerberg approaches theology as a grammar. Just like grammar in language is a second order reflection on language, theology in the academy is a second order reflection on a way of being in the world. To be a scholar of a grammar for a language you do not understand is likely to lead to a lot of confusion. So too if one is a theologian without a life of liturgical practice.

<sup>14</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, ix, describes himself as part of the “Schmemmann-Kavanaugh school of liturgical theology” because he shares with them the “supposition ... that liturgy is primary theology, and that the *lex orandi* of the Church establishes her *lex credendi*.” Fagerberg describes in *Theologia Prima*, 101 that Aidan Kavanaugh led him in an independent study on everything written by Alexander Schmemmann in Fagerberg’s first year of study at Yale Divinity School. It was during this time that Aidan Kavanaugh was preparing the lectures that would become his book, *On Liturgical Theology* (Liturgical Press, 1984). Kavanaugh, a southern Baptist convert to Catholicism shares a similar methodology to that of the Russian Orthodox theologian Schmemmann. Michelle Gilgannon, in her dissertation, “The Liturgical Theology of Aidan Kavanaugh, OSB: Synthesis and Critique” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2011), 52, <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/581>, describes Fagerberg as a “disciple” of Schmemmann and Kavanaugh’s similar method for the study of liturgy.

<sup>16</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, xi.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Ashleigh E. Morrehouse (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966), 14.

an encounter with a tradition which inculcates an entire way of being and seeing.<sup>18</sup> The object of study is found in the interplay of the liturgical text, the world, the people, the church, and God, and not by looking directly at liturgy itself.<sup>19</sup> To study liturgical theology the theologian investigates the ways in which “the liturgy refers humanity and the cosmos to God” and to the ultimate goals of the church’s existence.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.1.1 Fagerberg’s Method for Liturgical Asceticism

The subject matter of the liturgical theologian is potentially vast in scope and can have a great many interlocutors and interdisciplinary methods.<sup>21</sup> The object of study in this dissertation is the ascetic aspect of formation made possible through the practice of habitual, liturgical prayer.<sup>22</sup> Such an investigation could try to understand desire formation

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu’s “critique of theoretical reason” may help to describe in different words what is at stake here for the liturgical theologians of this school. The “native” Bourdieu noticed is “unselfconsciously embedded in a community of practice” and has an “unselfconscious understanding which defines the practical relationship to the world.” This is different from the social scientist whose thought is characterized by an “epistemological break,” “a distance foreign to those immersed in the community of practice.” This distance creates a limit on what the theoretical observer can understand of a practice. There is a practical knowledge that is irreducible to theoretical reflection. Bourdieu’s critique helps to name the limits of theoretical reasoning and, in so doing, creates a way of appreciating and honoring the “pre-logical logic of practice” displayed by the “native.” The Schmemmann-Kavanagh school seem to be arguing that the liturgical theologian’s goal is to study the “native” at prayer. Smith summarizes Bourdieu’s approach in *Imagining the Kingdom*, 75-78.

<sup>19</sup> Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology* (Kettering, OH: Angelica Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 79.

<sup>21</sup> So too are the conversation partners of a liturgical theologian. This is a discipline that is necessarily interdisciplinary. It touches on a vast number of theological subdisciplines but is also done in conversation with disciplines in philosophy, the social sciences, cultural studies, ritual studies, gender studies, music, the arts, etc. See Joris Geldhof, “Liturgical Theology”, 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> This is of course an idealized vision, an attempt at naming the fruit of a lifetime of practice when the scholar naming it is only at some midway point of life and only herself stumbling along the ascetical way. I share with Fagerberg a certain hesitancy about the project itself and its attempt to speak about that to which I am ill equipped to testify. And I certainly don’t wish to identify myself with a certain voyeuristic scholarship or “armchair” asceticism that Coakley calls out in her work *The New Asceticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 18, the kind of scholars who merely talk but do not do. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, xi, describes an unease in writing about this topic as well, identifying a unique discomfort that caused regular interruption of his academic project because of a

using the tools of ethnography or psychology, but Fagerberg does not take that approach. Instead, he offers an investigation of expert witnesses to the transformation found through lives of prayer. He suggests that the ascetic aspects of liturgical life can be best learned from a study of the ascetic tradition of the eastern church.<sup>23</sup> By studying these ancient ascetic masters, looking for their description of the goals of ascetic life and the role of prayer in their own formation, he can offer his reader an ascetic lens for understanding liturgical prayer. Liturgical theology can have as its object of study what the act of liturgical worship teaches about God, the world, the church, ourselves, etc. Liturgical asceticism, as an aspect of liturgical theology, narrows the object of attention to the loves cultivated by liturgical life and the desire forming aspects of the practice.

### **3.1.1.1 The Liturgical “End” of a Christian Life**

Fagerberg says, “Liturgical asceticism is the struggle to imitate what we see in the liturgy, namely, a human being in filial communion with God the Father.”<sup>24</sup> What is being surfaced here? Fagerberg looks at the activity of the church in prayer and notices a Christian “end” (*theosis*) both accomplished and practiced in liturgical life. Life in communion with God is what Fagerberg sees as the highest desire cultivated by the eucharistic liturgy. He also describes this goal as the growth from “the image of God” into

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conviction that it is hubristic and even dangerous to teach about the virtues instead of acquiring them. I, like he, will stand on the shoulders of others, offering an account of the ascetic formation of the Jewish self via liturgy that is dependent on the testimony of the ascetic work of others who have gone before me.

<sup>23</sup> Fagerberg references a large number of sources for his investigation of asceticism. Some of the teachers he heavily draws on include, St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373), St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395), Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), John Cassian (360-435), Maximus the Confessor (580-662), St. Isaac of Nineveh (613-700), St. Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894), Paul Evdokimov (1901-1970), and many more.

<sup>24</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 27.

the “likeness of God.”<sup>25</sup> It is in eucharistic practice that Christians live the communion to which they are called and capacitated.

Fagerberg’s definition of liturgy is, “the Trinity’s *perichoresis kenotically* extended to invite our synergistic ascent into deification.”<sup>26</sup> I understand this to mean, in less dense vocabulary that liturgy is the Trinity’s dance of love poured out to invite our cooperative ascent into deification. On the one hand, we pray liturgy in order to live better, we “pray to live.” We pray to live into this ascent to deification. Prayer is a means to transformation of desire and ultimately, to deification.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, prayer cannot be instrumentalized. The thing we are doing is so important it must be done for its own sake; we are meant to “live to pray.”<sup>28</sup> Liturgy is itself the dance of love. Liturgy is the way, and the goal. The liturgy is the cause and effect. It is worship, an expression of devotion, a training ground of the heart, an ascetic activity. It is also the goal itself, a place of encounter with the transformational love of God.

Fagerberg elaborates on this idea with the help of Maximus the Confessor who taught that, in so far as a gratuitous act can have a purpose, creation of humans was for them to “become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4) and sharers in His eternity, so that we might come to be like Him (1 John 3:2) through deification by grace.”<sup>29</sup> Humans,

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<sup>25</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 12. Fagerberg makes a distinction between the image of God and the likeness of God suggesting that there is a progression from image to likeness that the ascetic path makes possible.

<sup>26</sup> This is Fagerberg’s definition of liturgy that he says demands asceticism. See *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 198, says that liturgy is the ontological condition for the *askesis*.

<sup>28</sup> I first heard these two ways of thinking about the activity of prayer in a lecture delivered in 2009-2010 at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem by Rabbi Richie “Shmuel” Lewis, Rosh Yeshiva. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 126-127, talks about the life of prayer impacting the world as “intensifying the world’s sacramentality.” As a person’s appetites are converted toward seeing the world as gift, toward seeing what is implicitly present in reality, that all water is intrinsically sacramental, something that he says we learn from the use of water in liturgy.

<sup>29</sup> Maximus the Confessor, “The First Century,” in “Various Texts on Theology, the Divine Economy, and Virtue and Vice,” in *The Philokalia*, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981), 2.173, quoted by Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 2.

Fagerberg argues, are unique in God's creation because they make possible a unique kind of liturgical expression, one that is both corporeal and intelligent. Corporeal non-intelligent creation, for example, the stars, offer praise to God by following the natural law that governs them; non-corporeal intelligent creation, the angels, offer praise constantly around God's throne. Humans have a special liturgical role between these two kinds of creation, a priestly role that Fagerberg says requires connecting both body and spirit to God.<sup>30</sup>

Fagerberg understands sacred history as beginning with a tale about the violation of this priestly function. He reads the story of Adam and Eve in the garden as a violation of the eucharistic goal because of disordered loves. He writes:

The world's original purpose was to be raw matter for eucharist. The whole world was meant to have been an hierophany of grace and a liturgical tool. But human sin stripped matter of spirit. The whole world was meant to be sacramental encounter with God, but we took it as an end in itself, and we are barred reentrance until we have regained control of our appetites.<sup>31</sup>

In Fagerberg's telling, the entire purpose of creation was to manifest God and create the context for divine human encounter. When humans lost sight of the world's purpose, made the finite an end in itself, the connection between the spirit and matter was severed. Disordered desire confused the value of physical goods, like a fruit from a forbidden tree, above the desire for relationship with God. Just as God called out to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" God is still calling to each person, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Christian life, from the perspective of Fagerberg, is about becoming the kind of creatures who hear that call and respond with love and longing, placing the delights of the world into their proper relationship to the One who is the source of all true delight.

In Fagerberg's understanding, the liturgical life of the Church is an ascetic path that capacitates Christians for this priestly role. "The purpose of liturgy [is] the sanctification of

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<sup>30</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 213.

man and the glorification of God.”<sup>32</sup> The purpose of liturgical life is to help us humans bring our corporeal and intelligent elements into right relationship, “clearing away anything that prevents us from giving full-hearted response to God.”<sup>33</sup> This eucharistic ideal summarizes the central end of a Christian life in Fagerberg’s thinking. What stands in the way of accomplishing this goal? According to the Christian ascetic tradition, the passions misdirect our hearts and the desires trap us and keep us from our purpose.

### 3.1.1.2 The Path to that “End”

Fagerberg uses the terms the malady (*pathe*), the cure (*askesis*), and the joy (*apatheia*) to talk about central elements of the ascetic path. The malady is disordered loves, *pathe*, and the misuse of things in the world because of that disorder. He describes it as a disregard for God because of a passionate attachment to that which is not God.<sup>34</sup> Drawing on a well-known list of passions by Evagrius, he summarizes the basic areas of folly: “gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and last of all, pride.”<sup>35</sup> These passions distort our thoughts and disrupt our emotions; they can even create bodily pain. These passions are not who we really are; they are negation of being. To live a life under their sway, subjected to their pull, is to live a life that is less real.<sup>36</sup> Freedom from the tyranny of the passions is what the ascetic life makes possible.

The treatment for the problem, the cure, is practicing *askesis*. *Askesis* is the art of rightly ordering the goods of life in their proper hierarchy, thereby making the world holy. Fagerberg offers a reading of Genesis 3:6 from the Fathers of the Church which explains that the sin of taking the fruit from the tree of knowledge was not fundamentally about

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<sup>32</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Evagrius, *Praktikos* 6, quoted in Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 77.

challenging God but instead it was about acting hubristically on an erotic appetite against God's instruction. The sin was about grasping what was not theirs yet, "taking prematurely and taking it as anything other than a gift."<sup>37</sup> Adam and Eve demonstrated an appetitive hastiness that grasped in order to get immediate satisfaction. The fruit itself was not bad; their sin was the misuse of the fruit, the lack of patience, the lack of self-control, the lack of delight in all they already had. The sin in the Garden of Eden was based on disordered longings.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, most of the things we love are not bad, but the amount that we love them is what causes us problems.<sup>39</sup> An ascetic might take up a practice of renouncing fine foods for a time. The renunciation comes not from a conviction that fine foods are inherently evil, but as an act of training the muscle of patience. The ascetic chooses to not enjoy a good thing right now, carving out an area of freedom from the power of gluttony. "Liturgical asceticism denies the immediate the right to prevail in a soul that is created for eternal things."<sup>40</sup> The ascetic life is a practice in the art of patience. It is not done properly if the renunciation of the thing leads to despising it.

Fagerberg understands liturgy to have a central role in rightly ordering the goods of life. He writes that by "sacramentally directing matter to a spiritual end... 'Liturgy elevates matter to its real dignity and destiny, and we understand thereby that matter is not some autonomous substance but rather a function of the Spirit... we are talking of the ascetical rehabilitation of matter as the substratum of the resurrection and the medium in which all epiphanies take place.'"<sup>41</sup> Liturgical prayer, an activity of the embodied community, is where

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<sup>37</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 18, quoted by Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 213, writes, "In our perspective, the 'original' sin is not primarily that man has 'disobeyed' God; the sin is that he ceased to be hungry for God and God alone.... The only real fall of man is his noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world."..

<sup>39</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty* (Redondo Beach, Calif.; Oakwood, 1990), 28, quoted in Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 34.

the ends of Christian life are rehearsed, enacted, and through which desires are rehabilitated. While individuals are in prayer, they become the Church uniting their bodies to the work of the kingdom, and they practice the right ordering of their desires in light of the central importance of the love of God. Fagerberg understands this retreat from the world into prayer as an action that is for the sake of a return to the world with purified desire, ready to bring “matter” to its destiny, the kingdom of God.<sup>42</sup>

Liturgy heals materiality with its disordered loves and brings it to perfected love, to beatitude. “A lifetime of liturgy in all its dimensions—the liturgical year, the liturgy of the hours, the Divine Liturgy, the fasts and feasts, the sacraments and sacramental—is required to give a person this calm, steady, ascetical regard of the godhead.”<sup>43</sup> The calm he describes here, the experience of beatitude, is a way of describing *apatheia*. *Apatheia*, a word taken from the Stoics, is sometimes understood as apathy, a lack of interest in life.<sup>44</sup> But in the ascetic tradition, it is a word used to describe freedom from *pathos*, freedom from disordered loves. *Apatheia* is “undistorted, proper, ordered relationship between God, spirit, body, and cosmos.”<sup>45</sup> It is a way of being human with the dignity befitting an image of God, a way of being “that receives all creation as sacramental gift from God, and offers all creation as eucharistic offering back to God.”<sup>46</sup> Not buffeted by passions but also not dispassionate, this way of being expresses deep freedom to love others and God. There is a sense of fullness of energy, but never a grasping energy.

Fagerberg points to the practice of the eucharist to further explain *apatheia*. The eucharist is an experience of the flow of the divine life between the trinity and an

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<sup>42</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 113.

<sup>44</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 103.

opportunity to participate in that life (*theosis*) while also a practice that reveals the need for *apatheia*, the way of being which comes about through training the passions.

When this mystery [the Eucharist] is celebrated in the liturgy, every human being sees what he or she is to become if only something did not stand in the way of fulfilling that vocation. The name the tradition uses to identify that which debilitates our liturgical identity is *the passions* (sic), and so liturgical asceticism may be said to consist of overcoming the passions (*apatheia*) in order to attain the liturgical posture that *anthropos* has forfeited.<sup>47</sup>

The eucharistic mystery centers the eyes of the Church on their ultimate vocation, to become “the likeness of God” through communion with God. The process of perfecting our loves, *askesis*, is about becoming the kind of people that are most deeply attracted to God, above all other desires. “Christians do not practice asceticism because they hate the world, but because by its ordered use (i.e. sacrament) it can become an encounter with the Kingdom.”<sup>48</sup> By rightly ordering all goods under God, the life of this world can become sanctified. The ascetic path offers a way of seeing all goods in the light of the eternal Good and therefore submitting to the use of all particular goods under the ordering of that ultimate Good.

Liturgical life teaches that the cure to misdirected passions is not found by focusing on the evil in the things that one is seeking to give up. The cure is found by falling in love with God. When a person falls in love, sacrificing other desires for that love is easy – not just easy, actually a joy. To the non-lover, the choices lovers make to be with one another, can seem like deep sacrifices. But for the lover, giving up lesser goods is not a burden. The same is true with ascetic life. “All asceticism in general... is based upon God’s supernatural love that takes hold of human persons and their world ‘and bursts them wide open, opening them out into the life of God himself, a life which has already arrived even though it is still

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<sup>47</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 28.

<sup>48</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 217.

hidden in faith.”<sup>49</sup> The ascetic may be doing what seems unimaginable to those who “have become calloused to our divine lover’s touch,” but for the lover, the “wild, bracing divine love” is a reality and the inspiration for *askesis*.<sup>50</sup> This is the kind of love to which a person opens themselves as they pray.

### **3.1.1.3 Who is the Path For?**

Some might think that *askesis* is only really suitable for people who have taken up monastic vows. Fagerberg is aware that his “experts” in this path are all monastics. He says that the lay person is just as much called to ascetic formation as the monk. What he is interested in is what the monk can teach the lay people about the journey.<sup>51</sup> Fagerberg describes the monk as “enlarging” the ascetic path making it easier to see. He also describes the monk as a “big baptized” meaning, the monk is doing the calling of the Christian life in a big way.<sup>52</sup> Monks can help the laity see the call to holiness more easily.

### **3.1.2 Evaluating Fagerberg’s Liturgical Asceticism In Light of the “Maximal Demand”**

Fagerberg’s liturgical asceticism centers the Christian story around worship and the right ordering of desire. This kind of sacred story telling can redefine the sense of purpose for any church community. Redefining something’s purpose will have massive effects for

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<sup>49</sup> Karl Rahner, S. J., “Reflections on the Theology of Renunciation,” *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3, 48, quoted in Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 80.

<sup>50</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 226.

<sup>51</sup> “We do not think that the monk is an ascetic while the layperson is not; we think that liturgical asceticism is practiced by both the desert ascetic and the secular ascetic, and we are interested in what the former can teach those living in the world about liturgical asceticism.” Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 219.

<sup>52</sup> “Fr. Aidan Kavanagh used to say about Sunday, to establish its normativity, that it is not a small Easter; instead, Easter is a big Sunday. What we normally celebrate on Sunday we do in a big way on Easter. In that spirit, we suggest that a secular Christian is not a little monk; instead, a monk is a big baptized. What every liturgical ascetic normally does, the monk does in a big way.” Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 220.

how the community directs its energies. A church community that saw its purpose as fundamentally liturgical and ascetic would educate differently, use its money differently, and would show up in the world differently. A life of liturgical asceticism changes what is seen as valuable and what is not. This could change both how individual Christians use their time and money as well as how Christian institutions carry their witness in the world.

But what about the usefulness of Fagerberg's approach as a model for the construction of a Jewish liturgical asceticism? Fagerberg's liturgical asceticism is a method shaped by a devout Christian for other devout Christians. He writes his book for a Christian audience, making little attempt to explain his thinking to outsiders. This could give the impression that liturgical asceticism is only possible as a Christian discipline. But comparative theology invites me to appreciate the particularity of Fagerberg's discourse without being shut out by it. So even though Fagerberg offers no reflection on the methods of liturgical theology or liturgical asceticism that would make me think it could be a discipline for non-Christians, I still found a number of elements to his method helpful as a model.

There are two overarching approaches to the study of liturgy that I found very helpful. First, Fagerberg shows that asceticism is implicit within the study of liturgical theology. The study of how communal liturgical practice shapes the people praying, liturgical theology, implies formation of their desires along with other aspects like the intellect or imagination. It is helpful for me to have someone model the centrality of desire formation and to explain its relevance to the wider conversation of liturgical theology. Second, he models what it looks like to prioritize practice through his insistence that practitioners of liturgical life are the true experts, not the scholars who reflect on it. By looking to monks as the exemplars of ascetical formation he reaffirms practice as central, expertise is found only through the long work of faithful practice.

But there are other elements of his approach to this field that I will not use in my own construction of a Jewish liturgical asceticism because of some concerns I have. Below I explain in detail both what I continue to appreciate in Fagerberg's approach and the reservations I have by offering comparisons to Coakley's recovery of asceticism and in light of Taylor's "maximal demand."<sup>53</sup>

### **3.1.2.1 Defending Asceticism from Its Critics**

Fagerberg's overall writing, in which he takes his Christian voice and a devout Christian audience for granted, affects how he presents his topic. On the one hand, I appreciate the integrity of Fagerberg's approach, taking his entire theological world for granted and mostly making short work of outside perspectives in his presentation of the topic. Fagerberg briefly defends his sources against modernist criticisms towards the beginning of this book, claiming that if we think there is something wrong with traditional asceticism, that is because we are bad readers or bad lovers, not because there is anything wrong with the thinking of the church fathers. He quotes compelling apologists who resist critiques of Christian asceticism. For example, he quotes extensively from G. K. Chesterton who argued that the ascetic work of the Church never declared that life was evil even while it taught that humans were sinful. According to Fagerberg, the Church always agreed with the late-modern critiques. The Church also condemned people who renounced all life and all happiness and taught the hatred of the body and horror of the material universe.<sup>54</sup> They

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<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor offers the "maximal demand" as a standard by which we can evaluate contemporary visions for human flourishing. To meet the demand, the vision for human flourishing must properly understand the significant moral problems of the human condition, offering a path that does not lower expectations too much nor pretend that humans are not capable of truly great evil. It is a vision for human life that sets a high bar without denigrating the ordinary human fulfillments of the non-transcendent, temporally bound, and physical creatures that we are. For a fuller introduction to this concept see chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>54</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, in *G. K. Chesterton: Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 2.354 quoted by Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 14.

were called heretics. Asceticism was never what it has been accused of being. As Fagerberg points out,

The purpose of asceticism is not to free the spirit from the body, as some philosophers would have it, but to free both the spirit and body from the passions. Being body-spirit creatures, the remedy has to be applied to the spirit through the body, by the body, along with the body. Asceticism is not a reproof of the body, it is a response to love, and the first responsive act is to turn one's face unflinchingly against anything that would disorient this love.<sup>55</sup>

Asceticism according to Fagerberg is driven by love of God and a deep hopefulness.<sup>56</sup> It is an activity of love for the sake of drawing near to the beloved, for the building of intimacy. And that work requires attentiveness to the beloved as well as attentiveness to the body-spirit relationship. "Asceticism only appears as a negation because it is clearing something away: it clears away anything that prevents us from giving full-hearted response to God."<sup>57</sup> There is struggle and resistance, but that struggle should not be against the body but against idolatry which, Fagerberg points out, is a liturgical category.

Idolatry is misplaced worship.<sup>58</sup> Orthodoxy, is "right worship."<sup>59</sup> Idolatrous objects of love need to be transcended, put aside, abandoned, for the sake of the highest and best love. In modern storytelling, a person who defies the values of their family and friends for the sake of a true and good love, is a hero. But someone or some group who does the same for the love of God is often characterized as benighted and tragic. Fagerberg reflects on this situation similarly to Chesterton whom he quotes, writing "[modern romanticism] knows that romantic love is a reality, but it does not know that divine love is a reality."<sup>60</sup> This is the flaw in contemporary critiques of asceticism. The critics misunderstand the extremes to

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<sup>55</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, in *G. K. Chesterton: Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 2.76, quoted in Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 19.

which ancient monks went in their asceticism because they can't imagine the kind of love of God that might produce that behavior. "Any attempt to understand liturgical asceticism will end in failure unless one admits the possibility of a wild, bracing, divine love exactly like this," according to Fagerberg.<sup>61</sup> Fagerberg is not wrong to point out the problem with an outsider's evaluation of ascetic life. How could someone of no faith understand the posture toward God, the self, and the world generated the love of God? But his tone is so defensive and his presentation of his sources so devoid of reflection on their potential to do harm that I found his retrieval of asceticism lacking.

Fagerberg shares with Coakley an approach to spiritual practice that privileges the prayerful contemplative posture as an essential mode of formation and appreciation for union with God as a primary "Christian end." But Coakley situates her recovery of Gregory of Nyssa in conversation with feminist critiques of asceticism, noting the way that its tropes can be used to manipulate the disempowered. Her recovery is careful and seeks to incorporate the learning that came from modern critiques of the church. Fagerberg's work is not. There is no space made in Fagerberg's thinking for what can be learned from the critics. They are entirely wrong. It is as if he thinks the ascetic practices of the early Church should be wholesale recovered and plopped into the contemporary moment. But the sense of self and society have so profoundly changed since that time, it seems willfully blinkered to not engage the ways in which a contemporary liturgical asceticism would need to be lived differently.<sup>62</sup> When Fagerberg's asceticism is evaluated in light of Taylor's "maximal demand" there are a number of areas for concern.

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<sup>61</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Taylor traces these many changes in massive works like *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

### 3.1.2.2 Setting the Standard Too High?

Fagerberg's summary of Christian identity as he understands it demonstrates another way in which his asceticism fails Taylor's "maximal demand." He says:

Our Christian identity should be shaped by living the liturgical rite, by the rhythm of the Church year, by the procession to the altar every eighth day, by seeing moral questions about human beings in light of their being an image of God, by the intellectual grasp of the content of faith and the bodily enactment of that same content, by fasting and feasting, by obedience to canonical authority, by stepping under the priestly hand of absolution, by catechetical witness that is sometimes uncomfortable in prophetic circumstances, by actualizing the domestic Church within the family, and by the hundred other concretized instances of liturgical life. Attaining *apatheia* in ascetical battle with the passions produces a stunningly normal person, a liturgical person, a saint.<sup>63</sup>

In this beautiful vision for Christian identity, we see the elevation of every Christian to the project of sainthood, the sense that everyone is invited to attain to the highest ideals of the church. It seems like such an inclusive vision. And yet, by calling a saint a "normal person," Fagerberg sets an extremely high bar for being a Christian, one that can have negative effects, even if he would consider them corruptions of his message. First, it can lead to profound self-condemnation when someone fails to attain this standard for normalcy. Second, it can lead to a whole lot of spiritual pride in people who believe themselves to be living in obedience to this vision, and even possible disgust for the Christians who aren't getting it right. This kind of disgust toward others is a regular feature of confusing an ideal with a bare minimum standard.

Another concern I have with Fagerberg's approach to asceticism is his uncritical use of monks as his only exemplars. If monks are the model for all "the baptized," won't it also be important to help people bridge the gap between the monastic lifestyle and that of the laity? People in families involved in the demands of commerce and employment face challenges to attaining *apatheia* that are different from those of monks. But Fagerberg has

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<sup>63</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 25.

just told the lay reader of his text that to be a normal Christian person, they need to attain this standard. What kind of guilt will people carry if they are too worn out to make sufficient time for the liturgical activities he describes? What happens when they fail at *apatheia* as they parent each and every day? Will they think it is because they have not sufficiently incorporated the lifestyle of monks into their daily routines? I suggest that perhaps the problem is not only with the practitioners; it may also be with the theologian who does not draw on exemplars who know the challenges practitioners face in “actualizing the domestic church within the family.” What are the practices already built into the mundane challenges of family life that can be understood as ascetic? What models are there for incorporating these liturgical rhythms into the demands of meal prep, carpool, and homework? Fagerberg suggests that the lay church member, someone he calls a laic, is asked to live in the world by being like the monk, able to “drop the goods of this world without a moment’s hesitation....”<sup>64</sup> What does it look like to actualize that vision in a context in which so many of the “goods of this world” are experienced in dependent relationships? When a monk dies, they leave no one whose life is fundamentally dependent on them. That is different for a husband and wife, a father or a mother. Fagerberg’s method of uncritically using the testimony of celibate monks for articulating a standard for the laity demonstrates a lack of learning about the dangers of ascetic standards. His approach to asceticism sets the bar so high that he risks denigrating the “ordinary” by setting it up as a barrier to ascetic goals.

Fagerberg’s liturgical asceticism also faces a problem with vulnerability. One of Nusbaum’s critiques of asceticism was that it was driven by a desire to flee our own human vulnerability.<sup>65</sup> Any recovery of asceticism, would require a description of the ideal which could maintain a delicate dance with our frailty and not induce us to try to flee from it or

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<sup>64</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 146. Quoting Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Man at Play* (New York: Herber & Herber, 1972), 39.

<sup>65</sup> See Chapter 2, page 65.

despise it. Fagerberg's presentation of asceticism does not always manage this dance adequately. While elaborating on Gregory of Nyssa's explanation of the change in Adam and Eve's condition after their sin, Fagerberg explains that humans have become so accustomed to certain traits that we think of them as normal when in fact, they are traits of mortality foreign to God's vision of human nature. He writes:

Human nature, as it is now, cannot be as God intended it in the beginning, and as it will surely be in the end. What has been added to human nature, to this image of God in man, according to Gregory, is the *garment of skin* (Gen 3:21). This *garment of skin* in us is made up of all those things which we have in common with animals; it is: sexual union, conception, childbirth, dirt, nursing, food, excrement, the gradual growth of the body towards maturity, adulthood, old age, sickness and death.<sup>66</sup>

Elsewhere Fagerberg insists that Christian anthropology requires that humans be understood as always composite creatures of both body and soul, and that asceticism is properly understood to be about a path to freedom of both the body and the spirit from the passions.<sup>67</sup> But here he uncritically presents an idea that key elements of our vulnerability necessitated by our embodiment are not what God intended for us. Our sexual life, procreation, nursing, our experience of eating, getting sick, or ageing, none of that is central to our humanity? Implicit in this teaching is that these qualities are external to our humanity and the result of sinfulness. They are something to be overcome in deification. There seems to be an implicit derision of embodiment in this teaching, and of the supposedly value of a life directed at the manifestation of the domestic Church within the family. There is an inconsistency to Fagerberg's thinking about asceticism manifest in his uncritical presentation of Gen. 3:21. And it demonstrates the dangers of his lack of attention to the possible dangerous applications of ascetic ideals. He could mitigate those dangers by offering some contextualization for this kind of teaching, or perhaps by recovering a

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<sup>66</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 99, quoting Jean Danielou, introduction to Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. Jean Danielou, S.J. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 11.

<sup>67</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 15.

different text, but he does not seem to share my concerns over asceticism's possible dangers.

### 3.1.2.3 The Missing Negotiation Between the Ideal and the Real

Fagerberg's liturgical asceticism does an excellent job of articulating an ideal but he often demonstrates a blind spot with regard to the reality of the world as it is given to us. His work fails to help his readers bridge between the ideal and the real. For example, he does not relate what he is teaching to any challenges faced by Catholics as they practice liturgical life. He also fails to grapple with the brokenness and sinfulness that manifests within the Church and not just outside of it. Fagerberg summarizes liturgical asceticism as "disciplined obedience."<sup>68</sup> This is a posture of submission and acceptance that Fagerberg never seems to problematize. Abuse of authority is always a risk within communities that idealize obedience to authority.<sup>69</sup> Not addressing this danger, for example, by suggesting counterbalancing practices or virtues of ascetic life that help mitigate the potential for abuse, is an oversight that shows a lack of concern for how these ideals touch down in daily life. The path of liturgical asceticism is only safe if people have good guides and trustworthy leadership. In today's climate of leadership crisis within the Catholic church because of sexual abuse scandals and manipulation and abuse of vulnerable people by secular authorities, Fagerberg's descriptions of Christian identity sound almost tone deaf.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Some of that abuse comes from leaders of "Christian" families who use the rhetoric of Christianity as tools for their abuse. See for example the disturbing cases of abusive Christian fathers in A. Imbens and I. Jonker, *Christianity and Incest* (London: Burs & Oates, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> Some of the more recent issues with abuse of authority within the Catholic church have been analyzed in the following texts: Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Thomas G. Plante, ed., *Sin Against the Innocents: Sexual Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); C. M. P. Engle, "Evil, Sin, and the Violation of the Vulnerable" in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. S. B. Thistlethwaite and M. P. Engel (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 152-164; Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story that Helped Ignite a Movement* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2019).

As I've shown, Fagerberg's approach to articulating the ascetic ideal within liturgical life shows a lack of appreciation for the way that these ideals can generate a misaligned relationship between the real world and the ideal, violating one half of the maximal demand. But, as I will describe, his approach is also violating the other half of the "maximal demand." In describing *askesis* he says, asceticism is only for people who are "healthy and well-grounded."<sup>71</sup> By this he means people with a solid sense of ego and personal self-worth. On the one hand, I understand this warning. The ascetic path is not supposed to be the path for people who feel that they do not live up to societal norms and are looking for ways to "fix" their failures. People who are unsure of their worth could turn *askesis* into a psychologically damaging project. Fagerberg acknowledges this, writing, "At its heart, the liturgical fast must be an act of self-discipline, but it can never be an act of self-loathing."<sup>72</sup> In one sense this caveat is supremely important. He is saying that liturgical asceticism is a path that makes the Christian into a saint; it is not a path that brings someone to skillfully navigate the world in socially acceptable ways. Those are not its goals. If a person is suffering from self-loathing, they are likely to misapply liturgical asceticism. But if liturgical asceticism is a way of being for the whole church, doesn't it need to be a path for the sick as well as the healthy? And is not part of the point that all of us are sick and in need of the therapeutic power of ascetic life? Hasn't Fagerberg said over and over that the reason we need the ascetic path is because we all suffer from disordered loves? Fagerberg's liturgical asceticism is focused on restoring our imagination for the heights of Christian excellence, but he does not deal sufficiently with the legitimate concerns of critics of asceticism. Fagerberg retrieves the thinking of Eastern Orthodox monastics but does not present their teachings with much concern for how they have been and could be misapplied in people's

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<sup>71</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 86.

<sup>72</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 86.

lives. Fagerberg's work is markedly different from Coakley, who both retrieves Gregory of Nyssa's teaching while validating and framing it in a way that shows that she has listened and internalized the concerns voiced by secular philosophers and Christian feminist theologians about the potential dangers of ascetic life. Fagerberg's writing treats the possible problems with asceticism only superficially.

The challenges to Fagerberg's vision of asceticism necessitates Coakley's model and definition of asceticism as a corrective. But Fagerberg's explanations of the liturgical theology and liturgical asceticism as a discipline will remain with this project. I offer one final reflection on the difference between my approach and Fagerberg's by way of explaining why I need to draw on the work of James K. A. Smith as my final Christian model before I can bring all these strands of thought together.

#### **3.1.2.4 The Missing Explanation of the Formative Dynamics in Liturgical Action**

Fagerberg claims that liturgical prayer is a powerful desire forming practice leading to *theosis*, but he also argues that right intention is vitally important for *askesis*.<sup>73</sup> This is puzzling because one would think that an act that is efficacious for desire would also be efficacious for purifying intention. But instead, Fagerberg says that ascetic activities take on different significances depending on the motivation for their fulfillment. This seems right in one way. Of course, the quality of an activity will be impacted by the attitude of the person doing the action. But such an emphasis on intention can also lead to a number of paradoxical situations. Intention is slippery. It is not something that each of us is ever totally certain about. We can set intentions, but there might be other intentions in the

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<sup>73</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 86.

subconscious that we later realize drove our behavior. But if liturgical prayer purifies desire, why doesn't it also purify intentions?

Liturgical practice is a complex action with a wide variety of dynamics at play. Certainly, intention will remain one variable that can impact its effectiveness, but there has to be a way of thinking also about the role of some of these other dynamics within the action and how they are also part of what makes prayer a formative act. Fagerberg's account of liturgical asceticism leaves us looking for a thinker who can fill in this gap. Fagerberg is able to paint a compelling vision of the ascetic ideal, but he does not give an adequate account of how liturgical practice concretely acts to change people. Does the form of liturgical life matter for its effectiveness? Does the way the liturgy is performed, or how frequently the liturgy is recited, or the postures one takes while praying have anything to do with the formative power of prayer on desire?

In the last chapter, bringing Coakley and Taylor together helped me to articulate a need for a new engagement with asceticism in light of the "maximal demand." Fagerberg's work links liturgical practice and the ascetic, creating a scope of inquiry within liturgical theology for the study of liturgy as an ascetic discipline. From Fagerberg's liturgical asceticism we have learned that the purpose of Christian life is the formation of desire for God, placing all other desires in their proper place in light of that heavenly love. What we do not learn from Fagerberg is anything about the "how" of liturgical desire formation. How does liturgical prayer transform the way of seeing, loving, and living in this world toward the fulfillment of a vision of Christian life and its ends? Fagerberg helps us name liturgy as the locus for teaching us the central need for desire formation in Christian life, but he offers no mode for the exegesis of liturgy. His method does not engage the text of the liturgy or the physical aspects of embodying a liturgy. This lack of direct encounter with how the specifics of the prayer practice impacts desire formation, the lack of exegetical "reading" of the liturgical

prayer practice, limits the model he offers. In contrast, James K. A. Smith, a Presbyterian theologian, offers a deep look at liturgical formation that thinks carefully about how liturgy forms desire. Using continental philosophy, he explores liturgical practice for its pre-cognitive, pre-reflective, formative elements. He links these aspects of desire formation and identity formation with the embodied and textual aspects of liturgical prayer, offering a method that helps name elements of liturgical life that explain how liturgy works to form desire. Where Coakley offers us a way of recovering the ascetic discourse for our contemporary moment and Fagerberg links liturgy to asceticism, defining a scope of inquiry, Smith offers a set of exegetical tools for reading liturgies for their desire forming elements. Bringing these three Christian theologians together completes a model that I will then use as a guide for my own articulation of a Jewish liturgical asceticism.

### **3.2 SMITH: EXEGETE OF THE LITURGY AS ASCETIC EXERCISE**

Over the course of the last decade, James K. A. Smith published a three-volume set of books he called a cultural liturgies project.<sup>74</sup> In these books he looks at liturgies as embodied practices which “aim our loves to different ends.”<sup>75</sup> Writing to a community often focused on forming Christian identity by intellectually inculcating a Christian “world-

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<sup>74</sup> Smith *Desiring the Kingdom*, 18, frames his project as an inquiry into what ought to be the purpose of a Christian education. He answers that it is, “The formation of radical disciples who desire the kingdom of God” (19). Why does he ask? Because he believes that his community has misunderstood what it is to be human, imagining humanness on an outdated model of modern philosophy that pretends the human person is primarily a rational animal.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

view,”<sup>76</sup> he argues that liturgies drive who we are and what we love.<sup>77</sup> What we love is shaped by the embodied and imaginatively rich habitual communal practices we participate in.<sup>78</sup> He calls these “formative practices,” and says that “liturgies” are one of these kind of practices.<sup>79</sup> Liturgies, according to Smith, are desire forming embodied practices that engage our imagination, implicitly communicating a *telos*. Liturgies that are important enough to form our very identity “trump other ritual formation.”<sup>80</sup> He names four formative aspects by which liturgy orients desire: habitual action and speech, the imagination, and narratives of ultimate concern. Below I introduce Smith’s liturgical anthropology and why he thinks these four elements are so important for forming desire. Then I look at a few examples of how his understanding can help exegete<sup>81</sup> liturgy from an ascetic perspective.

### 3.2.1 Homo Liturgicus

Smith’s liturgical anthropology is based on a creative reading of Augustinian anthropology together with a few continental philosophers and social theorists. He creates

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<sup>76</sup> For an overview of Presbyterian apologetics and the role of “world-view” epistemologies see Owen Anderson, *Reason and Worldviews: Warfield, Kuyper, Van Til and Plantinga on the Clarity of General Revelation and Function of Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008); and Joseph Runzo, “World-Views and the Epistemic Foundations of Theism,” *Religious Studies* 25, no. 1 (1989): 31-51. doi:10.1017/S0034412500019703.

<sup>77</sup> Smith has a shorter popular work that summarizes some of the same material he covers in *Desiring the Kingdom* in a book called, *You are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016). His anthropology is rooted in a recovery of Augustinian theological anthropology in conversation with the philosophical anthropology of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, as well Charles Taylor’s “social-imaginary.”

<sup>78</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 24. This implies that he means more than just the activity of the Church in prayer by the word liturgy, something we see later when he describes the “liturgies of the mall.” See *Desiring the Kingdom*, Chapter 3.

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 86.

<sup>81</sup> I have chosen to use the word exegesis because I see Smith’s methodology as a kind of exegesis, he is offering a critical explanation of the liturgy as it relates to its desire-forming capacity. His exposition of both what liturgy is forming, namely desire, and how it works, appeals to liturgical practice and liturgical text to support his claims. Smith’s method uses critical tools from philosophy and attentiveness to liturgical practice and the text. His liturgical asceticism method is exegetical in orientation.

a model for understanding desire formation, the work of asceticism, as largely a pre-conceptual and pre-conscious re-orientation of the way that humans inhabit the world. His argument flows from the insight that much about how we act throughout our day does not even rise to the level of consciousness.

... we don't *think* our way through to action; much of our action is not the outcome of rational deliberation and conscious choice... [our action] grows out of our character and is in a sense "pulled" out of us by our attraction to a *telos*.... Our hearts need to be captured by a vision of a *telos* that "pulls" out of us action that is directed toward the kingdom of God.<sup>82</sup>

Smith is directing our attention to what we often do not notice at all. He is asking us to think about the ways in which much of our action happens without a lot of reflective thought. And he suggests that what drives that pre-reflective action is what we desire. Our vision of what is worth living for, our vision of the good life, that is our *telos*. And that *telos* is the thing we desire. Desire motivates a lot of our unreflective action in the world. For a Christian, he argues, the *telos* that they love needs to be "the kingdom of God." He will go on to argue that the practice of liturgical prayer is a way that Christians capture their own hearts.

Smith suggests that human beings should be understood primarily as "loving, liturgical animals" or in other language he provides, "desiring, imaginative animals."<sup>83</sup> He suggests this definition in contrast with other models regularly used to make sense of humans in contemporary analysis, *homo economicus* (rational economic actor),<sup>84</sup> *homo*

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<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51.

<sup>84</sup> In its simplest sense this is the human being as efficient actor seeking the maximum amount of gain for the minimum amount of effort. In short, humans, it is assumed, act in their rational self-interest. This nineteenth-century idea can be traced back to the works of John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith, among others. As part of James K. A. Smith's analysis in *Desiring the Kingdom*, Chapter 3, of human beings as "desiring, imaginative animals," he offers an analysis of the mall as a powerful pre-conscious source of desire formation and formative of our selfhood. For a fuller argument in this same vein, see William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

*religiosis* (believing being),<sup>85</sup> *homo rationale* (rational animal),<sup>86</sup> or *homo faber* (man the maker).<sup>87</sup> He is particularly concerned with freeing his own community from its modernist assumptions about the central role of beliefs and ideas to what we are, but other secular models focused on technological attainments and self-interest are also models he seeks to displace. He believes all these models together misunderstand the human condition. He offers a different picture, one that he calls liturgical anthropology, writing:

...liturgical anthropology... offers a theoretical model of the human person that emphasizes that we are not primarily theorizers.... A liturgical anthropology is a theoretical attempt to appreciate our pretheoretical navigation of the world – a *theory* about the primacy and irreducibility of *practice*.<sup>88</sup>

His anthropological model, that he notes ironically is itself a theory, focuses attention on the pre-theoretical embodied way of navigating the world that he describes simply as desire. At the heart of his liturgical anthropology are two claims. First, is the idea that, at bottom, what motivates our actions and forms our character, is desire.<sup>89</sup> Humans think, perceive, and act

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<sup>85</sup> This model suggests that humans are religious creatures, defined by a supra-rational worldview that forms our commitments. We are believers before we are thinkers. For an example of *homo religiosis*, Smith points to Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff who attacked the cognitivist model of humans as rational animals. Smith wants to add to their picture a deeper understanding of us as embodied social agents of desire. See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 45.

<sup>86</sup> Smith summarizes this model in *Desiring the Kingdom*, 41-42, as present in Western philosophy since Plato's *Phaedra*. Plato argued that what was most essential about being human was our rational but immaterial soul. Descartes re-articulates the centrality of our thinking capacity as something that is fundamental to being human. For Descartes, knowledge of my own existence is also knowledge of myself as a thinking thing. This rationalist cognitivist picture of the human continues through Kant and Hegel in different forms and is adopted, Smith says, especially by Protestant Christianity. This anthropology, he says, stands behind highly cognitive expressions of Christian Protestantism that puts their focus on maintaining the right doctrine, ideas, and world-views as the heart of being Christian. Smith expands his critique of the rationalist worship practices generated by this approach in James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 140-41.

<sup>87</sup> Max Frisch's novel, *Homo Faber*, trans. Michael Bullock (San Diego, CA: A Harvest Book, 1959), is a paradigm for this vision of what makes us human. Walter Faber is a highly successful engineer who embodies a technically oriented, severely rational ideology that maximizes logic and probability. The novel implies throughout that there are real problems with Faber's approach to the world of technology as philosophy.

<sup>88</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 75.

<sup>89</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51, says that he does not distinguish between love and desire. Fagerberg's approach to desire was focused primarily on the disordered aspect of desire, what he calls "the passions." See Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 29. Smith is going to focus on giving a broader account of desire both rightly ordered and disordered.

from the “attunement” of their “background” which Smith says is what they love ultimately. The second is the claim that desire is made, not born in us. It is formed pre-cognitively through storied, habitual action. Liturgies (both religious and “secular” activities)<sup>90</sup> form our desires when they form our “background” way of making sense of the world. To understand how liturgies work, Smith says we have to come to re-understand what kind of creatures we are.

### **3.2.2 Attunement, Desire, Telos, Story and the Social-Imaginary: The Heideggerian Augustinian Taylor Contribution**

Smith brings together an Augustinian theological anthropology and Heidegger’s phenomenology of care to talk about the idea that the most fundamental way that humans are in the world is love. He stitches the ideas together in this way. From Heidegger, he draws the idea that there is no way to get outside of the world, no place to stand from which to think without being involved. Our consciousness is always already directed, aimed at some object, not static but dynamically *intending* the world. For Heidegger, we move about

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<sup>90</sup> While not directly relevant to my inquiry, Smith has a very broad understanding of what can be included under “liturgy.” His interest extends to thinking about “competitive” practices that also form the background understanding of the world; practices that many would consider not religious and therefore would not apply to them the word “liturgy.” Smith interprets “the mall,” national celebrations, and the university liturgically, noticing the ways in which they operate in pre-cognitive ways. He argues that they are pedagogies of desire, seeking to create certain kinds of people who pursue a particular *telos*. His arguments here are embedded in his thinking that there is no such thing as secular institutions. See *Desiring the Kingdom*, Chapter 3, and James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping A Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 143-83. His willingness to name all these activities as “liturgies” suggests a Protestant disregard for sacramentality that Fagerberg does not share. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 10, is concerned with maintaining a difference between liturgy and other rituals. He describes “liturgy without asceticism and theology” as “a species of ritual studies...” He does not even want to give the name liturgy to any ascetic ritual that is not motivated by Christianity. He writes, “There are many other motives for practicing an asceticism, but if the motive is to become by grace what Christ is by nature, then this asceticism is liturgical because it relies upon the sacramental bestowal of the grace of Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit” (11).

the world as “traditioned actors” involved with, but not thinking about, the objects in our world. Perception and cognition are not our primary modes of engagement with objects; we most often engage them by care, a pre-cognitive affective way of moving about the world.<sup>91</sup> This mode of engagement with the world is what Heidegger called our “attunement” to the world. Smith pushes this thinking further by weaving in Augustine, to whom Smith claims Heidegger was indebted for his phenomenology of care.<sup>92</sup> “Augustine,” Smith claims, “would argue that the most fundamental way that we intend the world is love.”<sup>93</sup> What we love ultimately is what we desire and what we serve with our lives. These ultimate loves are a structural feature of being human, even if we aren’t self-aware enough to be cognizant of them. Our ultimate love:

...governs our vision of the good life, [it is] what shapes and molds our being-in-the-world, in other words, what we desire above all else, the ultimate desire that shapes and positions and makes sense of all our penultimate desires and actions.

What Smith does here is link together Heidegger’s phenomenology of care with Augustine’s priority on desire for God as the final ultimate love, retrieving Augustine’s theological anthropology in a new register. Augustine may have articulated his insights about the self in Platonic philosophical terms, but that does not have to stop Smith from reconstituting his theology phenomenologically.<sup>94</sup> Put another way, Smith is arguing that our pre-conscious

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<sup>91</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 49, citing Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 41-42.

<sup>92</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50. In footnote 18 he cites Heidegger, *Being in Time*, 405n7 where he says “Our existential analytic of Dasein toward ‘care’ occurred to the author in connection with attempts at an interpretation of Augustinian, that is, Greek and Christian, anthropology.”

<sup>93</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50.

<sup>94</sup> Smith argues that the existentialist/phenomenological tradition has Augustinian themes and is indebted to Augustine for the insight that “an understanding of being is integrally linked to self-knowledge.” In “Confessions of an Existentialist: Reading of Augustine after Heidegger Part 1,” *New Blackfriars* 86, no. 964 (2001): 273-282, he offers a reading of Augustine in which he draws out the ontology he sees present there. Using Heidegger and Hannah Arendt and drawing on the interpretive structure of the prodigal son as a metaphor for the soul, he lays out the theory of selfhood that he employs in *Desiring the Kingdom*. He argues that for Augustine “the self is defined by what it loves, what it directs itself toward, what it refers to.... The self is, in a sense, ‘ek-static,’ necessarily transcending and referring outside itself and beyond itself in order to find ‘meaning.’” He summarizes Augustine’s journey of self-reflection into the self as leading to a realization of the infinity at the abyss of the human that can’t conceptualize the self. Hence Augustine concludes that is not the path

way of being-in-the-world, what Heidegger talked about as “care,” is desire, and desire is structured by our total vision of the good life, by what we love. For Smith, desire and love are not relevantly different; we do not manifest one without the other.<sup>95</sup>

Smith’s claim is that he is merely describing what it is to be human. Humans are desiring animals, humans are lovers.<sup>96</sup> Things matter to us in ways we can’t explain. We find certain things attractive, we are drawn to certain acts, we develop relationships, all because of what we love in an ultimate way. And what we love ultimately is not something simple like our family or a pet. Instead, Smith claims that what we love ultimately is an all-encompassing vision, a *telos*, a vision of the good life that draws our desire.

Smith uses Charles Taylor’s writing about a “social-imaginary” to help explain *telos*, especially how it is formed. *Telos* is not something we construct alone. It is a picture we receive from our society.<sup>97</sup> In *A Secular Age*, Taylor claims “every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is.”<sup>98</sup>

Such a picture of human flourishing will have all sorts of components: implicit in it will be assumptions about what good relationships look like, what a just economy

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to knowing the self. “What then am I?” Augustine asks. The answer comes from understanding the self’s own infinity in relation to the Infinite, the Origin of its existence. That relation Augustine says is one of love. The self is constituted as authentic or inauthentic by the object of its love (278).

<sup>95</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51. For Smith there is nothing inherently negative about desire; it can be ordered or disordered, but desire itself is neutral for him. We will see in the next chapter that Israel Salanter talks about pre-conscious desire as naturally inclined toward selfishness. If we were to translate this into Smith’s terms this would mean humans always begin with a limited horizon on their vision of the good life. They will need to expand their vision to be able to transcend their natural selfishness. I am left wondering how Smith would speak about original sin. Is disordered desire only a product of society’s influence on our social-imaginary?

<sup>96</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51.

<sup>97</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 16. Taylor is interested in the way that religious visions of flourishing maintain a transcendent element to their *telos*. He reflects on the way that Christian thought places the loving, worship of God as the ultimate end, but that God is one who is understood to delight in the imminent experiences of human flourishing. Of course, this isn’t all that God values. “The injunction ‘thy will be done’ isn’t equivalent to ‘Let humans flourish,’ even though we know that God wills human flourishing.” (17). There are specific possible moments of clash between an us-centered life and a God-centered life. For the Christian, Taylor writes, “the call to renounce doesn’t negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing of others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God” (17).

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

and distribution of resources look like, what sorts of recreation and play we value, how we ought to relate to nature and the nonhuman environment, what sorts of work count as good work, what flourishing families look like, and much more.<sup>99</sup>

Smith calls this a picture because it is more than a set of ideas. It is an image of a way of being in the world that may be codified in certain practices, in moral codes, and in philosophical theories, however badly, but it is really more like a vague sense that we get from our social-imaginary of what's worth living for. This vague picture of human flourishing is the *telos* of a social-imaginary, which Taylor describes as:

...much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I'm thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underline these expectations.<sup>100</sup>

The social-imaginary is a complex web of assumptions and inclinations based on lived experience, stories, histories, images, activities, etc. that have gone into forming what a person assumes to be their most basic reality. A social-imaginary carries implicit pictures of the good life, of human flourishing; every imagination is framed by one, if not the same one. Taylor will describe the social-imaginary further as "'background' ... that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation... It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines."<sup>101</sup> Hence Taylor uses the word "imaginary" and not theory to describe it. This background picture of the world is not communicated best in theoretical terms; rather it is "carried in images, stories, legends,

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<sup>99</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53.

<sup>100</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 173, cites Hubert Dreyfus, *Being in the World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991) and John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), both of whom draw on the work of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Polanyi. He also draws heavily on Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991)..

etc.,<sup>102</sup> something that one does not have to be a theoretical specialist to understand or produce.

...the social imaginary extends beyond the immediate background understanding which makes sense of our particular practices... [to include] a wider grasp of our whole predicament, how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, etc.<sup>103</sup>

This “background”/ social-imaginary is the context within which humans dream, act, reflect, and think.

Smith’s understanding of the human condition began first with Heidegger’s idea of care, the idea that we begin from a place of already intending the world, of existing already in a relationship of care with the world.<sup>104</sup> He then layered on the “social-imaginary,” a much fuller articulation of the social construction of that world. Images and stories, the way of talking and living modeled around us, cultivates the imagination about what is worth

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<sup>102</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172. Smith develops his account of story in *Imagining the Kingdom*. There he links the heart and the body via story:

...we live at the nexus of body and story – a “between” space where the aesthetic force of a narrative or poem captures our imagination because it resonates with the bodily attunement that so fundamentally governs our being-in-the-world. The imaginative logic of *poiesis* plucks our deepest heartstrings, and such aesthetic resonances reverberate in deep corners of our unconscious, attuning us in ways we are not even aware of (108).

Story and the stories that liturgies both tell and invite us to enact, as dramas, become one of Smith’s major tools of analysis of the ascetic (desire) formation taking place in liturgical practice. Alasdair MacIntyre discusses the centrality of story to our moral reasoning and identity in *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 214: “I can’t know what I ought to do unless I have already answered a prior question, of which story am I a part?” While Smith wants to argue that long term, encounter with liturgies is formative regardless of conscious attentiveness, the stories that are most formative are the ones that we feel addressed by and in which we feel a part. Story and text and tradition all come into play also in Gavin Flood’s description of the entextualization of the ascetic self. He makes two relevant points in *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). First, the rituals that an ascetic participates in are infused with texts, which include stories, that make the rituals irreducibly tradition specific (218). Second, that text is not passively received; its meaning is constructed “between the intentionality of the text and the subjectivity of the reader” (221). This should indicate to us also that stories are not internalized one way, nor do they simply create desires all on their own. The subjectivity of the traditioned self, living in relationship to the stories, is both tradition specific and still unique.

<sup>103</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 172-173.

<sup>104</sup> For an introduction to “care” in Heidegger’s thought see Mark Wrathall and Max Murphy, “An Overview of Being in Time,” *The Cambridge Companion to Being in Time*, ed. Mark Wrathall (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-53; and Timothy Stapleton, “Care and Authenticity,” *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, ed. Bret Davis (Durham, UK: Acumen Pub, 2010).

achieving in life, what life is about. The social-imaginary informs our telos, and we relate to that vision most primarily from love. Thus, whatever forms the social-imaginary, whatever forms our background, influences our *telos* and what we desire. Images, stories, legends, are all sources of desire formation, teaching us what to love but in such a subtle way that we don't notice that we are being taught.<sup>105</sup> Film and novels are often what we think of when we imagine story as formative, but there are innumerable ways that we encounter stories that can structure what we come to ultimately value. When political pundits analyze the news, we are being shaped by their evaluative frame, their values are implicitly communicated through the lens of the analysis. When we walk through a mall, that activity engages our imagination on subtle levels impacting our vision of ourselves and of what we ought to be.<sup>106</sup> When we participate in social media, we construe the universe and our place in it in unique ways.<sup>107</sup> Liturgical prayer, Smith argues, is another totally immersive space that is telling us stories, engaging our imagination, and cultivating in us love for a Christian *telos*.

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<sup>105</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 109, says that his work resonates with that of MacIntyre, Taylor and Christian Smith who work in the philosophy of social sciences and “emphasize the centrality of narrative or story in the formation of both individual and communal identity – and in shaping our action and ethical behavior.”

<sup>106</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Chapter 3. For more on desire formation by consumer culture see William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>107</sup> In *Imagining the Kingdom*, Smith notes how in a social media inflected world one is trained to see all others as an audience. “Whereas the technological rituals we just considered reinforce a social-imaginary in which I am the center of the universe, only related to others as an audience for my display, Christian worship is an intentionally decentering practice, calling us out of ourselves into the very life of God.” (149) The social media world trains people to be hyper-selfconscious, compromising their ability to inhabit their world and live for a *telos* because they are abstracting themselves from life every time they take a picture and post. They end up trying to act as witty commentator on their lives rather than inhabiting their own story. The social media universe is a retreat from action to live in a world of self-congratulation.

### 3.2.3 How Liturgies Work

Thinking about liturgy as the locus for the re-formation of our “background” brings clarity to why liturgical theology focuses attention on the Church at prayer. To study the Church at prayer is to study the “social-imaginary” created by the liturgy which is embedded with images, stories, and legends, and through which the people of God become constituted and constitute themselves as the Church by collective worship, training desire with pictures of a “complete [flourishing] Christian life and it’s ends.”<sup>108</sup> By linking together desire, *telos*, and a socially held vision of the world, it becomes clear that to understand how desire is formed by liturgy, we have to think deeply about what stories of ultimate concern we participate in as we pray, and what constitute the visions of the good life we are learning to love as we pray the liturgy. The study of liturgy’s operation on desire, liturgical asceticism as a method, will entail both a clear articulation of *how* the liturgy shapes the “background” from which humans make sense of their world, as well as *what* we are being capacitated toward. Because Smith takes the time to name how he sees liturgy operating on the kind of creatures that humans are, it becomes clearer what it would look like to exegete liturgy to answer the “what” questions of liturgical asceticism. It would take looking at liturgies for the stories of ultimate concern that they tell. It would take asking what we are learning to love from those stories.

But even this summary is not complete. Smith wants to push a step further in his account of how liturgies work. Images, stories, and legends are not just talked about; they are also enacted in liturgical practice. There is a key role for habit and the body in understanding human desire formation. If you recall from chapter two, the role of our

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<sup>108</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 18.

bodies and of habits is highlighted in Coakley's definition of ascetic formation.<sup>109</sup> An understanding of how liturgy works to form desire will need to also give an account of the role of bodies, not just minds. What role does Smith have for the body and habit?

He has a central one. Smith says the reason that we are desiring, imaginative animals is because we are embodied.<sup>110</sup> Heidegger talked about intending the world through care most simply as a description of how we move (in our bodies) through the world relating to objects. We don't relate to them as abstract concepts; we relate to them with our bodies and with our sense for their purposefulness to our embodied selves as already present. Smith looks to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu to help draw out further the importance of body and habit to his understanding of liturgical anthropology.

### **3.2.3.1 The Body and Habit: Contributions of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu**

Smith points to Maurice Merleau-Ponty as helpful for understanding the body's central role in forming the "social-imaginary." Merleau-Ponty taught that humans are in "incarnational suspension between angelhood and animality—as mind and body."<sup>111</sup> There is no mind that perceives through the body, there is only the betweenness, a fundamental hybridity. Smith quotes Merleau-Ponty who writes, "...there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself."<sup>112</sup> We know ourselves only in our bodies. The body is "the condition for the possibility of consciousness. It is my constant

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<sup>109</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 18. "integration of intellectual, spiritual, and bodily practice"

<sup>110</sup> Many of the other visions for what it means to be human like homo rational and homo *religiosis* have emphasized what it is to be human despite our embodiment. One of the benefits of Smith's approach is that it makes space for a very central role for embodiment.

<sup>111</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 43.

<sup>112</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), xii. Quoted by Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 42.

background.”<sup>113</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, “consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body...”<sup>114</sup> As we exist in the world, we develop a “habit-body,” a habitual way of being in the world with the kind of body that we have. Smith gives the example of the way the body construes the world: If I have hands, I relate to a cup not merely consciously as cup but also as “pick up able.”<sup>115</sup> If my body changed, were I to lose my hands, I would know the world differently. My body gives me a “horizon” of my experience that my consciousness operates within. I don’t observe my body; with my body I observe.<sup>116</sup> Humans are irreducibly hybrid and Smith wants to make sure we don’t miss this when we think about liturgy. Its pedagogical power will have something to do with the body.

Up until this point Smith had focused our attention on desire, imagination, story and society as constitutive of our background. With Merleau-Ponty he adds another layer to his anthropology, describing the body as an irreducible part of our background. Our bodies learn and respond to the world below the level of conscious intellect through the influence of story and images, and through the body.<sup>117</sup> How are bodies habituated? The answer is in the very word “habituated,” i.e. through kinesthetic habits.

Smith reaches for the social science theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, to help him develop a better understanding of the relationship of our “background” to our embodiment. Bourdieu teaches that the body is a “depository of deferred thoughts that can be triggered at a distance in space and time by the simple effect of re-placing the body in an overall posture

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<sup>113</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 49.

<sup>114</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 159-161. Quoted by Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 56.

<sup>115</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 44.

<sup>116</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 50.

<sup>117</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 98, writes, “It is just to the extent that a social body—and its social vision—is incarnated that it will be pedagogically successful, able to incorporate members into the body politic and inscribe in them the *habitus* that defines a people or a polis.” Smith offers little wiggle room here, insisting that any educational mission that doesn’t engage the physical can’t be successful.

that recalls the associating thoughts and feelings...”<sup>118</sup> Body posture is a storehouse for thoughts and feelings. The most mundane things that we do, our routines, incorporate us into a community of other people who do those things as well. One of the first things we focus on with preschool-aged children are the habits of standing in line, raising hands, moving from space to space in an orderly way. Musicians and sports players teach their bodies skills that others don’t have through long hours of practice, but it isn’t just physical skills where our bodies learn. “The body politic implants in me a *habitus* by immersing me in an array of tangible movements and routines that effectively ‘deposit’ an orientation within.”<sup>119</sup> This is a process we all undergo in our coming to function within our world; this is a dynamic of kinesthetic initiation through “bodily postures, repeated words, ritualized cadences”<sup>120</sup> which we learn from our social world, because they are embodied by the people around us. Someone who has been initiated is able to function as a “native” within the society, able to anticipate what will be said or done with others in a way that feels “natural.” Based on this idea, Smith argues, the initiated Christian is most properly thought of as someone who has acquired a Christian *habitus*, not just someone who has Christian ideas but a person who has been habituated within a Christian social-imaginary. A Christian, through embodied, imaginative, and intellectual formation comes to a new perception of the world, themselves, and their place within it.<sup>121</sup>

Formation at all these levels is what Smith sees going on in liturgical prayer. And that formation then forms the way that a Christian shows up in the rest of her life. The

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<sup>118</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 69 quoted by Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 94.

<sup>119</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 95.

<sup>120</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 95.

<sup>121</sup> My subject is traditional communal and textual liturgical prayer. For a treatment of the power of charismatic prayer in forming one’s background see Tanya Luhrmann’s book *When God Talks Back* (New York: Random House, 2012). She describes the formation taking place as the creation of a new “theory of mind.”

Christian is someone who lives in the world differently from others who do not share that identity.<sup>122</sup> This shouldn't be surprising if we've taken seriously the hybridity of what it is to be human.<sup>123</sup> Our bodies are who we are; we don't imagine our world or ourselves or our place within the world without them. The body is a pedagogical gateway to the "background," the "picture," I hold of the world and the good life. Our kinesthetic formation cultivates our imagination, forming visions of a way of life with certain goods that we desire. "We don't choose desires; they are birthed in us. They are formed in us as habits."<sup>124</sup> Our desire for a particular *telos* pulls certain kinds of activity out of us, reinforcing our habituation through action that continues our embedding within a *habitus*. The circle continues with my body, my imagination, and my desires all together shaping how I know myself and my world and how I then chose to act within it. Liturgy, according to Smith, meets people at all these points, plunging them into a different formation, a new inculturation, another *habitus*, an alternative way of being in the world.

A suitable summary of Smith's claim is that liturgies are intellectual, spiritual, and bodily practices that communicate to our pre-conscious embodied selves a complete vision of the Christian life and its ends.<sup>125</sup> Liturgies train our background, our social-imaginary, and invite us to love the ends, the visions of the good life, implied in that way of seeing. How

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<sup>122</sup> Smith writes, "The embodied, ritualized formation begins to spill over, shaping and priming my perception of the world in other spheres of experience" (*Imagining*, 95). This line of thinking is crucial for the relevance of Smith's argument to religious communities. The ritual activity is meant to be not just be something that makes one good at the ritual activity itself; it is a way of embodied being that inflects the way people behave outside of the specific liturgical contexts.

<sup>123</sup> Smith regularly refers to the embodied aspects of his analysis as "incarnational." He sees his work as helping the Church relate to its own incarnational reality in new and perhaps more positive ways. It isn't just "the world" that disorders our desires because of our bodies; the ritual life of the Christian community also can use the body to help train the heart. The body isn't just the tool of evil; it is, more neutrally, at the very heart of what we are and can be a pedagogical pathway for holiness. Smith's theological anthropology offers a way out of the body-soul dichotomy and conflictual thinking that is often a part of Christian reflection on embodiment. Instead, the body can be an ally in the process of coming to imagine the Kingdom of God.

<sup>124</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 125.

<sup>125</sup> In this sentence I have reframed Smith's claims about liturgical formation within the structure of Coakley's definition of asceticism.

do liturgies do this? Regular practice of liturgy is an encounter with repeated words and bodily postures which engage our imagination, telling stories of ultimate concern, painting pictures of what is worth living for and loving.

Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies. They prime us to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects. In short, every liturgy constitutes a pedagogy that teaches us, in all sorts of precognitive ways, to be a certain kind of person. Hence every liturgy is an education, and embedded in every liturgy is an implicit worldview or understanding of the world. ... implicit in them is an understanding of the world that is pre-theoretical, that is on a different register than ideas.<sup>126</sup>

Smith's cultural liturgies project is a bid for our imagination, an invitation to reimagine ourselves and what motivates our actions. Drawing on the work of recent philosophers and social theorists, he offers us a new "awareness" through a set of descriptions woven together and presented as a new understanding of desire formation. He introduces the reader to the "background," a pre-theoretical way of being that includes embodied know-how, a way of intending the world by love, a whole shared communal set of assumptions that includes ways of imagining what is worth living for and what is worth doing with our lives. Finally, he suggests that all these elements of what we are, our embodied knowledge, our desire, and our social-imaginary, are formed by liturgies. This anthropology is largely a recapitulation of social-theory and continental philosophy, but he traditions his argument by also drawing on Augustine and putting all the talk of background into a discourse about directing love and desire toward "the kingdom of God." He traditions his philosophical anthropology, bringing it into the theological register by drawing on the wisdom about desire formation within the Christian ascetic tradition.

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<sup>126</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

### 3.3 LITURGICAL ASCETICISM: A CONVERSATION WITH SMITH, COAKLEY, FAGERBERG AND TAYLOR

Smith's liturgical anthropology helps me to answer the "how" question: How does liturgy accomplish its ascetic work? It works on the practitioners by inviting their intellect, emotions, imagination, and bodies into repeated encounters with stories that are about ultimate concerns; it re-forms their social-imaginary with the telos of "the kingdom of God." Liturgy is the training ground of desire, the place where communities through habitual engagement with story and embodied action cultivate pre-consciously a way of intending the world.<sup>127</sup> Liturgy trains humans to love differently from others, forming unique communal identities. In a word, liturgies are powerful, even dangerous, but so is life lived with a desire misdirected by mass consumer forces.

Smith never uses the word ascetic, but reframing Smith's claims in the words of Coakley's definition of ascetic shows how closely his cultural liturgies project fits with her understanding of asceticism.<sup>128</sup> Here is my version of Smith's claim in Coakley's language of

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<sup>127</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 167, n. 29, mentions briefly that the pre-cognitive aspect of formation is effective even when a person may be just going through the motions. He says this is not the ideal, but it follows from his thinking that the liturgy's ascetic power is not totally nullified by a lack of attentiveness by the person praying. He cites Richard A. Blake, *Afterimage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2000), in which Blake talks about the persisting Catholic imagination in the work of directors who may have rejected their faith, but their Catholic formation still marks their imagination.

<sup>128</sup> This is only possible because Coakley's approach to Christian asceticism reframes it away from being merely about self-denial, as some of its most vociferous critics understand it. The ascetic life, under her approach becomes a life that is intentional about cultivating desire for God, though both practices focused on what is added and on what is taken away. Coakley's new asceticism is a way of speaking about religious formation that is focused most directly on the formation of desire. Her broadening of the ascetic opens space to include Smith's thinking about the power of liturgical prayer to form our loves within the framework of the new asceticism. Smith also shares her understanding that desire formation happens in a wide variety of practices, even though his work focuses most directly on the role of liturgical prayer. We see evidence of this in the way he encourages Christian universities to adopt monastic practices and styles of organizing communal life on campus, commending "prayerful observance of the daily office, ... Sabbath observance, works of mercy in the neighborhood; weekly acts of hospitality for students, faculty, or those outside the university community; fasting together once a week; worship together at a local parish; a yearly service project; and more..." See his *Desiring the Kingdom*, 226.

ascetic formation: *A life of liturgical prayer is a fully integrated intellectual, spiritual, and bodily training in love/desire over a lifetime that is both sustained by and shapes a complete vision of the Christian life and its "ends."* Coakley's definition was more broadly focused on asceticism with a variety of possible practices supporting the ascetic formation, but reworded in this way, her definition also proves a helpful summary for Smith's work. "Liturgical prayer" replaces "asceticism," "training in love/desire" replaces "practice." In making these small changes we can see a natural way in which these two theologian's work dances together, focusing our attention on the training of love, the ascetic work that they both commend to the church today. What follows is a brief description of how I hear this description of liturgical asceticism in light of the thinking done so far with Taylor and Coakley, Fagerberg and Smith.

"A life of liturgical prayer," understood with Fagerberg and Smith's influence, stands in my understanding at the heart of Christian life. Fagerberg's liturgical theology makes the broadest claim, describing prayer as the highest calling of existence, the very purpose for which humans are created, both the "apex" of human destiny and the practice that prepares our hearts for that destiny. Smith inflects my understanding of these words, asking me to think of the work of prayer as central to becoming a "native" Christian. While he commends the liturgical life of Christian denominations that have prayer books, his expansive use of the term "liturgical" broadens my thinking about the desire-forming power of all kinds of religious and non-religious activities. A liturgical life, understood from a Smithian vantage point, is not such an exclusive way of living. From his way of describing things, the mall or the university or the military can all be "liturgical." But when I balance Smith's account with Fagerberg's, I think we come to a clearer understanding of liturgical prayer. Smith is not wrong that there are many desire forming institutions and activities that compete with the church's desire forming and identity bestowing practices like prayer, but Fagerberg would

not call these liturgies because, in his thinking, they are sources of disordered desire. Under Fagerberg's thinking, liturgy is only properly ascribed to the activity that directs the heart in true worship leading to ordered desire. For the purpose of this comparative project, I will use "liturgy" and "liturgical prayer" in this sense, even while accepting that there are desire-forming forces which disrupt and even undermine the formation meant to take place within liturgical worship.

"Fully integrated intellectual, spiritual, and bodily training in love/desire" is a phrase that helps name both the complexity of the human condition and the centrality of love/desire to what motivates our action and forms our character. This phrase calls to mind Fagerberg's teaching about the passions as misdirected desire that tyrannize the body as well as the spirit.<sup>129</sup> The ascetic training as he understands it is a training of the whole person for the freedom of the person, a freedom only found through rightly directed love. This phrase should also remind us of Smith's approach, taking our thinking a step further. Smith uses Taylor's idea of the social-imaginary and the philosophical anthropology of Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty to help explain how liturgical asceticism works. By fleshing out of the connections between body, story, telos, the social-imaginary and desire formation Smith uncovers the implicit ascetic power of liturgical prayer. His thinking helps make the wisdom of liturgical asceticism explicit by explaining how liturgy integrates so many elements of the human person in the work of desire formation.

The claim that liturgical asceticism is the project of a "lifetime" should also evoke a whole lot of crucial ideas based on the above study of Coakley, Taylor, Smith and Fagerberg. Coakley's approach to asceticism taught the importance of patience. She taught ascetic practices, like contemplative prayer, are paths which disclose their goods not through heroic acts of daring but rather through patient training that is meant to accompany an

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<sup>129</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 15.

entire life.<sup>130</sup> Smith agrees. The formation of a Christian is an ongoing project.<sup>131</sup> This patient approach to desire formation calls to mind Taylor's "maximal demand."

Taylor helps put guardrails on this recovery of asceticism project, helping to name ways in which asceticism can damage rather than perfect. There is danger in focusing so much energy on desire formation and attentiveness to the passions, a danger that one's practice might disrupt the flourishing of the intellect, the spirit or the body, by seeking a perfection that is actually a mutilation of the complex being that is human existence. Taylor's thinking about the danger of teaching people to despise what is essential to humanness but also the danger of pretending that we do not need desire formation are crucial guidelines for this project. And as I demonstrated above, Coakley's willingness to grapple with objections to ascetic practices and her own careful commendation of contemplation demonstrates that Taylor's challenge can be met. Finally, Fagerberg describes liturgical asceticism as not only a practice for the sake of accomplishing Christian formation but also as the purpose of human existence. It is the work of life; liturgical asceticism is the recovery of our liturgical vocation.<sup>132</sup> All these ideas are now part of what I mean when I say that liturgical asceticism is a project for a "lifetime."

This description of liturgical asceticism says that liturgical prayer is sustained by a "full vision of Christian life and its ends." Such a vision is critical to practicing ascetic life properly because a full Christian telos has a corrective force against possible zealous misapplications of ascetic practice. Fagerberg points this out as he defends Christian asceticism. A proper full Christian vision of life would necessarily avoid some of the excesses of which ascetics have been accused because the Church confirms the ultimate

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<sup>130</sup> Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 102

<sup>131</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 226., says that Christian formation of the heart must be understood as something that happens over time. Ecstatic experiences or the occasional religious action cannot foster the kind of formation in love that he is commending.

<sup>132</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 213.

value of life and the body.<sup>133</sup> According to Fagerberg, true Christian asceticism cannot teach hatred of the body because orthodox Christian teaching celebrates the physical world made by a good God.

Talking about the telos of Christian life as part of a definition of liturgical asceticism does not just serve to correct inappropriate expressions of asceticism, it also helps us understand how a vision of Christian life is constantly refined by the practice of prayer. Fagerberg, Smith, and Coakley all rely on authoritative voices within the Christian tradition to describe the telos of Christian life. Fagerberg and Coakley both reach for mystical descriptions of the love that is shared between the members of the Trinity.<sup>134</sup> Coakley also describes attaining virtues like “the fruits of the spirit”<sup>135</sup> along with feminist virtues like “personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry.”<sup>136</sup> All these are virtues that can be rooted in biblical teachings. Smith speaks about the telos using the New Testament language of “the kingdom of God.”<sup>137</sup> Smith’s vision for the ends of liturgical life is both individual and cooperate in its scope while Coakley and Fagerberg focus more on the transformation experienced by the individual, but all three use descriptions that are based in authoritative Christian sources. All three understand that the path of ascetic formation is not complete for any of them, and so they look to others who walked ahead or to sacred scripture when they describe the Christian telos. But liturgical asceticism does not just form our desires, it also shapes our intellectual and spiritual vision for the ends of Christian life. Liturgical asceticism is inspired by these visions of the telos of Christian life, and it also carries those visions, embedding

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<sup>133</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 15.

<sup>134</sup> Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 9. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 120.

<sup>135</sup> Gal. 5:22-23.

<sup>136</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 39.

<sup>137</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*. He speaks of it all the time, pointing to the kingdom of God as the telos of Christian desire formation. But he gives the longest expression of it in his exegesis of the social-imaginary embedded in Christian liturgy that can be found in Chapter 5.

them within the social-imaginary of praying Christians, refining any vision of Christian ends they would have begun with. In my own account of a Jewish liturgical asceticism, I will rely on the witness of another wiser voice who gives an account of the telos of Jewish life, and, as I exegete the liturgy, I will point at ways the Jewish telos of life both supports and adds more to the first account.

As I hope this short summary demonstrates, I've constructed this conversation between Taylor, Coakley, Fagerberg, and Smith about liturgical asceticism because I find that all four thinkers deal with asceticism and liturgy in ways that enrich my thinking as a Jewish theologian. In modernity Jewish thinkers have expressed ambivalence about asceticism, complicating the Jewish relationship to thinking about desire formation by questioning if ascetic thought is authentic to Judaism.<sup>138</sup> This dissertation seeks to found a new conversation about desire formation and liturgical life in a Jewish key. With the help of these four thinkers I craft an approach to a Jewish liturgical asceticism, chastened by Taylor's standards set forth in his "maximal demand" and inspired by Coakley's new asceticism, Fagerberg's liturgical asceticism, and Smith's cultural liturgies project. Together, their work prompts me to ask, what would a Jewish liturgical asceticism sound like? How might Jewish liturgical prayer be studied differently if we approached it as an act which is utterly central to our humanity, as Fagerberg and Smith do? How might Coakley's definition of asceticism be spoken from within a Jewish register? How might a recovery of ascetic discourse enrich our understanding of practice and the "ends" of Jewish life? What can Smith's philosophical attentiveness to "background" formation teach us about how liturgical prayer forms our desires? The next chapter invites the reader on an exploration of Jewish thinking about the formation of desire and constructs a Jewish methodology for liturgical asceticism based on the teachings of the Musar master, Rabbi Israel Salanter.

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<sup>138</sup> For an account of some of the reasons for this claim, see chapter 1, pages 38-48.



#### 4.0 THE RECOVERY OF AN ASCETIC IDEAL THROUGH THE *MUSAR* TEACHINGS OF R. ISRAEL SALANTER

If Jewish liturgy is going to be read as a desire-forming practice, if we are going to talk about liturgical asceticism in a Jewish register, I need a way of talking about a “complete vision of Jewish life and its ends” toward which the ascetic work of prayer directs the practitioner. I also must show how desire is woven into a Jewish theological anthropology so that my application of Smith’s approach to analyzing liturgy as formative for desire is spoken from within an authentic Jewish discourse about desire. Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883), known as the founder of the *Musar* movement in nineteenth-century Lithuania, will be our guide to help accomplish both these goals. The orthodox Jewish *Musar* movement emphasized the importance of cultivating piety, a rich inner life, and especially reflection and the cultivation of virtue. The movement encouraged the study of classical Jewish texts, known as *musar* literature, that describe the virtues. They also encouraged a variety of unique pedagogical practices to inculcate virtue.<sup>1</sup> Elements of this movement remain influential in contemporary Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

I turn in this chapter to retrieve the theological anthropology of Rabbi Israel Salanter as a resource for constructing a Jewish way of talking about the human condition

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<sup>1</sup> Following the recent convention of Moshe Gerstel in “The *Musar* Practices of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 17 (2016-17): 218-234, I use “uppercase ‘*Musar*’ to refer to the *Musar* movement, and lower case ‘*Musar*’ to refer to all forms of religious and ethical self-perfection, regardless of historical time-period. Hence, for example, a ‘*Musar* text’ is a religious-ethical text prescribing or proscribing various behaviors or practices, regardless of whether it had its genesis in the *Musar* movement historically” (218).

<sup>2</sup> The impact of this movement continues in yeshiva education and as a rich resource for reflection on the inner life by Jewish practitioners of psychology looking to bridge the gap between their secular field and Judaism.

and its potential for self-cultivation through prayer practices.<sup>3</sup> Why Salanter? Israel Salanter contributed a unique understanding of how human motivation operates and developed special practices to influence the self. He attributed great importance to ethical improvement through unique methods of internalizing Torah. But most especially, I am using his thought because his theological anthropology is traditionalist, grounded in a thorough knowledge of rabbinic literature, while also being modern in key ways. Salanter's conception of self reflects a shift from pre-modern to modern, from what Charles Taylor describes as a porous to a buffered self. Taylor describes the pre-modern porous self as vulnerable to spirits, demons, and cosmic forces. The sources of our most powerful emotions were understood to originate outside the mind; the idea of a clearly bounded inner self that could disengage from the rest of reality was basically non-sensical. But the modern buffered self can be invulnerable, autonomous, and disengaged.<sup>4</sup> Spiritual forces become psychic forces, opening a new horizon within the human, a potential inner depth that now needs explaining. This modern understanding increases the sense of power we have over the self. Self-mastery and self-direction are new opportunities in a world where each human is able to order her own life rather than needing to live in accordance with a cosmic order that held ultimate influence over one's wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> Salanter's theological anthropology is innovative in precisely these two ways. He creatively engages classical rabbinic anthropology, applying it to further our understanding of our inner selves while also constructing innovative practices to help us shape that self. It is his use of theological language to address modern

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the methods and purposes of Comparative Theology see Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> In Jewish thought, the move to disengage the inner world of the self from outside meddling, the creation of a "buffered" self, is not unique to modernity. According to Ishay Rosen-Zvi in *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Ha'ra and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity*, the amoraic rabbinic understanding of the *yetzer* (inclination to evil) already reflects an internalization of the responsibility for human sin from external forces that had previously been credited to *diamonds* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 38.

challenges that drew my attention. Finally, I am using Salanter because his understanding of the inner self as driven by desire has some similarities to James K. A. Smith's Augustinian inflected outlook.<sup>6</sup>

Other scholars, like the historian Immanuel Etkes, have chosen to examine Salanter's thinking as a kind of pre-Freudian psychology.<sup>7</sup> He argues that Salanter's theories were influenced by psychological theories of the enlightenment thinker, R. Menachem Mendel Lefin, and his book, *Sefer Heshbon Ha-Nefesh*.<sup>8</sup> Etkes' approach suggests that Salanter's discourse is a form of translation of psychological ideas into theological terminology. Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, Musar scholar and practitioner, disagrees with Etkes' approach. His intellectual history of Salanter accepts that Salanter is often credited as an "early psychologist of the unconscious,"<sup>9</sup> but he disagrees with this approach to Salanter's work, preferring to build up an understanding of Salanter's teachings from within his discourse, protecting our understanding from being colonized by psychological terminology. Goldberg disagrees with Etkes' claim that Salanter was influenced by Lefin, arguing instead that we can account for Salanter's thinking on the pre-conscious element of the self by the fact that it was a popular topic in his era. His own work should be seen as an independent creative engagement with it and not dependent.<sup>10</sup> Goldberg says that while we recognize the thinking as similar to that of psychological subconscious, Salanter would not have thought about his project in those terms. He never used psychological terminology of

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<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993). Etkes says that Salanter's teachings on human ethical improvement "were based on a model of the human psyche that may be characterized as modern" (6).

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Gerstel argues that *Musar* and psychology could be mutually enriched by learning from one another in his essay "The *Musar* Practices of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 17 (2016-17): 218-234.

<sup>8</sup> Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 123.

<sup>9</sup> R. Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter: Text, Structure, Idea: The Ethics and Theology of an Early Psychologist of the Unconscious* (New York: KTAV, 1982), vii.

<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 175.

“subconscious” at all, employing medieval and rabbinic Jewish theological terminology from *Musar* literature, Jewish philosophy, and Rabbinic sources.<sup>11</sup> To use the terminology and methodology of psychology risks obscuring the theological dimension and missing the uniqueness of Salanter’s thought.

I have chosen to follow Goldberg’s general approach, to use limited psychological terminology as an aid to explain Salanter, because I don’t want to translate Salanter into a secular discourse. Salanter was deeply committed to the theological register and to helping Jews discover the wealth of reflection and personal growth available through Torah and commitment to a traditional Jewish way of life.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, I am not unaware of the ways in which Salanter’s work is helpful to psychology today. It can help to make psychotherapeutic treatment more palatable to segments of the Jewish community suspicious of outsider influence.<sup>13</sup> There is reason to think that psychology owes some debt to Jewish thought as a source for its understanding of the unconscious.<sup>14</sup> But this potential interconnection between the two fields should not be allowed to obscure the difference between psychology and theology. Theology is an older tradition with different sources of authority, different assumptions about metaphysics, and different goals. Theological

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<sup>11</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 176.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Steiner, professor of Philosophy at the Hebrew University describes Salanter’s teaching as deeply Jewish in the problems it is responding to and the sources that he uses. “R. Israel’s work is certainly Jewish: his frame of reference is almost exclusively the legal and ethical sources of talmudic culture. All of the problems he treats grow naturally from these sources. And the problems, furthermore, are problems that arise out of trying to live according to those sources.” See his “Rabbi Israel Salanter as a Jewish Philosopher,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, Vol. 9 (2000): 42-57, 43. Steiner is someone who, in contrast to the psychologists, reads Salanter as a philosopher. He argues that Salanter should be understood as a philosopher because his thinking raises and systematically answers classic philosophical questions in ways that are both original and insightful contributions. He offers two examples in this essay: Salanter on the weakness of the will and Salanter on the relationship between humility, rationality, and the emotions.

<sup>13</sup> Psychiatrists like Aaron Rabinowitz, “Torah, Spirituality, and Psychotherapy,” *B’Or Ha’Torah* 18 (2008): 38-47, have written about the usefulness of Salanter’s work in helping build a rapprochement between religion and psychiatric psychology.

<sup>14</sup> See David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1958) and Aaron Rabinowitz, *Judaism and Psychology: Meeting Points* (Northvale, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999).

anthropology, a discourse replete with the wisdom of the ages as well as divine revelation, has much to contribute on its own terms to our truthful understanding of what it is to thrive. A theological approach to Salanter's teaching mirrors the overall goal of this dissertation to write theologically about the transformative power of liturgical prayer.

In this chapter I provide a general introduction to Salanter's life and times along with an overview of his leadership activity and his teachings to help situate him as a thinker for readers unfamiliar with him. I then proceed to answer the following questions, which help elucidate Salanter's theological anthropology.<sup>15</sup> What is Salanter's vision for a wholistic Jewish life and its "ends"? Based on his understanding of the kind of creatures humans are, how does Salanter propose that we attain those ends? This chapter concludes with an evaluation of Salanter's teaching on desire formation in light of the "maximal demand." The conclusions achieved in this chapter will be brought together with the other chapters to construct a Jewish definition of ascetic formation for our time and a method for investigating Jewish liturgical prayer as an ascetic practice.

#### 4.1 THE CONTEXT OF SALANTER'S LIFE AND WORK

Rabbi Israel Salanter's Musar movement was an educational endeavor focused on ethical formation through the inculcation of virtue.<sup>16</sup> Salanter's writings offer an early-modern take on the human condition with attentiveness to the subconscious but spoken of

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<sup>15</sup> Salanter offers an understanding of what it is to be a human being and a Jew in light of Judaism's understanding of the human being's relationship to God. Therefore, I describe his thinking as theological.

<sup>16</sup> For a then-comprehensive bibliography of the literature on the *Musar* movement, see Goldberg, 309-29. For more information about the intellectual history of Rabbi Israel Salanter's ideas, both their roots and their fruit, see Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*.

entirely through traditional Jewish sources. He also developed unique pedagogical methods for training human desire.<sup>17</sup>

Salanter lived at a time of great upheaval within Russian Jewry. Traditional social structures were weakening in the 1840's under the influence of national policy changes like: the implementation of "compulsory enlightenment," i.e., Tzarist government reforms to Jewish education; the compulsory conscription of Jewish teens into the Russian Army; and the abolishing of the *kahal*, autonomous local Jewish community governance. At the same time, Jewish followers of enlightenment ideals, *maskilim*, were working in cooperation with governments to foster cultural, economic, social and political integration of the Jews into general society.<sup>18</sup> They encouraged Jews to learn the language of the new nation states in which they lived and advocated for general and vocational training.<sup>19</sup> Talented youths, who formerly would have entered the rabbinate, were given access to other professions, professions that took them away from the standards of life supported by traditional communities.<sup>20</sup> These changes, and more, undermined the former spiritual and cultural homogeneity of Russian Jewish communities.<sup>21</sup>

Salanter's Musar movement, which is often described as focused on ethical formation, is properly described also as a movement for ethical and spiritual renewal built

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<sup>17</sup> For an introduction to these practices see Gerstel, "The *Musar* Practices of Rabbi Israel Salanter," 218-234.

<sup>18</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 173. For more on the work of Maskilim in Russia during this period see Etkes chapter 10 and Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of a Jewish Society in Russia, 1825-1855* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> According to Shaul Stampfer, *The Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning*, trans. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz (UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), by the mid 1880's in the tzarist region, more Jewish students were studying in the university than in yeshivas. He claims that the *Musar* yeshivas were built for the purpose of creating an alternative vision of life that could compete for the allegiance of the young with other enlightenment ideologies like those promoted by Haskalah or Zionists.

<sup>21</sup> For a summary of these dynamics in nineteenth-century eastern Europe, see the collection of essays by Shaul Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis, and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010).

on cultivating piety among the Jewish masses. The spiritual-cultural homogeneity of pre-enlightenment Europe made conscious cultivation of piety less important since communal norms and the structure of social power were more influenced by the spiritual values of traditional Judaism. But with the changes brought about under the influence of the enlightenment and the rise of the nation state, Jews were thrown into new social and economic contexts where they embraced new ideals directed at integrating Jews into European society. In that context, the future of Jewish piety could no longer be carried by communities. Immanuel Etkes, a historian of modern Jewish history and a recent biographer of Salanter, points out that Salanter's solution to these challenges differed from other Orthodox options. "Unlike German neo-Orthodoxy, which sought to overcome the crisis of the tradition by means of a synthesis of 'Torah with worldliness,'<sup>22</sup> Salanter worked to restore the vitality of the tradition, by cultivating *its own inherent values*."<sup>23</sup> To counter the eagerness with which Jews were running to join modernity, Salanter sought to deepen their commitment to the values of Jewish life by inspiring them to cultivate a deep and personal piety. To do this, Salanter developed new ways of inspiring the masses toward a traditional vision of the good life, the wholehearted fulfillment of God's will in all its ethical and ritual elements.

Salanter's goals were very practically focused on influencing the Jewish community. He did not leave any systematic presentations of his thought. His ideas were shared mostly

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<sup>22</sup> Etkes's translation of Samson Raphael Hirsch's idea of "*Torah im Derech Eretz*." Hirsch used this phrase, first found in Mishnah Avot, as a summary of his philosophy for how to integrate Judaism and the demands of modernity. He used "*Derech Eretz*" to refer to Western cultural norms of dress, civility, and general education. "*Torah im Derech Eretz*" implies the maintenance of a commitment to carefully following Jewish law while allowing for the socialization of Jews into Western cultural norms and the pursuit of Western education. For a summary of the use of this idea within Jewish education, see the introduction to Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Collected Writings: Jewish Education* (United States: P. Feldheim, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Emphasis mine. Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 322.

through sermons and personal instruction, through letters and in a few publications.<sup>24</sup> One of Salanter's recent biographers describes him as primarily an educator whose ideas about human motivation and ethical formation developed over his many years of teaching and leadership activity.<sup>25</sup> It is these ideas about motivation and formation that are of interest to me in the creation of a method for thinking ascetically about Jewish liturgical prayer.

#### 4.1.1 Biographical Overview

Salanter was born Israel Lipkin in a district of Kovna (today's Lithuania). He descended from a rabbinic family and was noticed for his intellectual abilities at a young age. He moved to Salant as a young man to study under the tutelage of Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Broide who was known for a style of exegesis that focused on *pshat*, a plain sense reading of the text. While in Salant, he married the daughter of a rabbi who then supported him in his studies. In his twenties, he taught Torah to younger boys while continuing in his discipleship relationship with Rabbi Broide. In Salant he also encountered an elusive righteous man known as Rabbi Zundel whose great piety was expressed in an absolute dedication to Torah study, a separation from any quest for worldly honor, a simplicity in lifestyle, and a refusal to be paid as a teacher of Torah.<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Zundel lived as a small and

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<sup>24</sup> In 1861, Salanter created and published essays in *Tevunah*, the first rabbinic periodical in Eastern Europe. It lasted for only one year. Its first four issues were published in Memel, known today as Klaipeda, Lithuania, and the other eight in Konigsberg, East Prussia. I. Etkes, "Tevunah: First Publication of a Rabbinical Periodical in Eastern Europe" [Heb.], *Kiryat Sefer* 54, no. 2 (April, 1979): 371-383.

<sup>25</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Salanter worried that he did not follow in his teacher's footsteps in this matter of not being paid to teach Torah. He never accepted a rabbinic position, but he did receive money for his Torah classes in various cities and he was supported by some of his students. Blazer, as Etkes records, said that Salanter was troubled all his life about his violations of the teaching that a Torah teacher should not receive payment for teaching others. See Mishnah, *Pirke Avot* 4:6 and Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Torah Study 1:7 for traditional renditions of this prohibition. Etkes also discusses Salanter's unwillingness

seemingly insignificant householder. R. Israel became aware of him when he noticed that the man had accustomed his life to maximal realization of *halakha*<sup>27</sup> in every minute action. Rabbi Zundel encouraged Salanter to take up the practice of regular self-examination and the study of musar texts. This hidden, pious, learned, yet profoundly humble servant of God, became Salanter's hero, an embodiment of the spiritual ideal he would seek to emulate.<sup>28</sup>

Israel Salanter's leadership within the Jewish community began as the head of Meile's yeshiva in Vilna (today's Vilnius) in 1840 at the age of thirty. Vilna had a Jewish population of 30,000-40,000 and was prestigious because of the large number of both traditional scholars (*mitnagdim*) and enlightenment Jewish intellectuals (*maskilim*) living there, the number of yeshivas that drew talented young students, and the many study houses for lay people. When Salanter arrived, it was also the center of conflict between *maskilim* and *mitnagdim* as well as a city with a very poor class of day laborers who lived in dire poverty. Etkes believed Salanter's sensitivity to the challenges facing Jews in his own time was deeply impacted by the eight years he spent in Vilna.<sup>29</sup>

Salanter's leadership of Meile's yeshiva only lasted a year because of a dispute between the trustees and the former head of the yeshiva. To help resolve the situation, Salanter voluntarily left his well-funded position and became a teacher in a study house in a Vilna suburb where a number of outstanding young scholars had asked him to instruct them. There he found a financial patron who supported Salanter and his whole family.<sup>30</sup> His

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to take a rabbinic position because he saw the financial remuneration, honor and power of the pulpit as an "exploitation of the Torah." Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 73.

<sup>27</sup> I hesitate to translate halakha as Jewish law. It means "the way to walk" and includes a large amount of literature that describes how a Jew is faithfully called to live out their calling from God. It begins with the commandments of God found in the Hebrew Bible and includes a vast amount of rabbinic, medieval and modern literature. This literature is often studied in legal codes which describe the ways in which a Jew can infuse the majority of their human activity with the consciousness of God.

<sup>28</sup> This history of Israel Salanter's life is based on the account given of his life by Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, chapters 4-6.

<sup>29</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 80.

<sup>30</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 83.

teaching drew new students and his erudition brought increased attention from other elites among the great Torah scholars.<sup>31</sup> By 1844 and 1845, his energy turned toward various activities that, when looking back at them with hindsight, are the start of what will become the Musar Movement. He started working with a close group of disciples, founded a house where musar texts could be studied with contemplative chant, and began to publish musar texts that were not commonly available.<sup>32</sup>

When Salanter started out teaching in Vilna, his sermon style was more typical of rabbinic scholars of his day. It was pitched at mostly learned Jews, filled with references to traditional Jewish sources, and demonstrated his deep capacity for close textually-based and nuanced reasoning. This helped to establish his credibility among the learned elite. But it was not so effective at motivating the average Jews whom he wanted for his audience.<sup>33</sup> Over time Salanter developed a more compelling style. He became known for sermons focused on religious and ethical self-improvement, spoken with burning passion. He became a favorite teacher among artisans, peddlers and coachmen for speaking “in simple terms about ordinary spiritual matters.”<sup>34</sup>

These sermons rely on a simple theological narrative frame about the purpose of our lives and how we live out that purpose. His sermons were emotionally powerful experiences. He would preach for hours about the awe of God and would offer reproof and

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<sup>31</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 84.

<sup>32</sup> Especially two works by Shlomo Ibn Gabirol and one *Musar* text by the eighteenth-century maskil, Menahem Mendel Lefin. See Geoffrey Claussen, *Sharing the Burden: Rabbi Simhah Zissel Ziv and the Path of Musar* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Etkes quotes Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg, who based his testimony on information from people who studied or heard Salanter. Etkes believes that Weinberg’s description is appropriate to Salanter’s sermons post Vilna, but don’t reflect his style of teaching there. Etkes’ opinion is based on the one collection of sermons published by Salanter in that period known as *Even Yisrael*. These sermons conform much more to the standard style of his time, learned, and focused on fine distinctions. However, it is also possible that for publication Salanter only wrote sermons that were likely to live up to the standards of other learned scholars. Sadly, we just don’t have enough information about Salanter’s time in Vilna to be sure either way. Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 88.

reflection on spiritual awakening. He always included himself in the rebuke in his sermons, presenting himself as someone who was striving for the ideal along with his students. His “Third Letter” in the collection of letters published under the name *Ohr Yisrael* offers a representative example of his style. Here he teaches that life in this world is for the purpose of preparing for the world to come.<sup>35</sup> Jews are called to the service of God through mitzvot, not to living for the pleasures and gains of this illusory life. God desires to gift us with life so that we serve God in truth and with faithfulness. But if we use our life energy for ourselves, and not for God, if we focus on satisfying our base desires, God will derive no pleasure from our lives. Aren’t our lives dependent on God’s mercy? We are lucky to be part of a community under whose collective merit we can take shelter. But can’t we each do more? We can each build into our lives a little study of musar. And musar will help us treat our sickness: the sickness of missing our true purpose, the sickness that comes from our selfish desires.<sup>36</sup> This summary of his letter demonstrates the simple reasoning that he often used, a reasoning that focuses on the fundamental sense that life is a gift and that, in gratitude for this gift, we are called to live our lives as a gift given back to God. The narrative style Salanter uses reflects his understanding of the human condition. As I noted in chapter 3, James K. A. Smith focuses in on story telling as powerful for desire formation. Salanter’s narrative approach sets him apart from many traditionalists of his time as well as from the style of most proponents of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish enlightenment) who tended to make highly rational arguments.<sup>37</sup> Salanter used inspirational techniques, story, melody, raised

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<sup>35</sup> Israel Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael: The Classic Writings of Rav Yisrael Salanter and his disciple Rav Yitzchak Blazer*, ed. Eli Linas, trans. Rabbi Zvi Miller (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 2004), 146.

<sup>36</sup> Salanter, “Letter Three,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 157.

<sup>37</sup> Etkes points out that it was customary for enlightenment arguments to proceed through appeals to reason rather than the emotions. *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 191.

voice, even tears.<sup>38</sup> He reminded people of their purpose and ultimate destiny by talking about how their lives fit into the great theological drama of all of history.

Salanter's reputation grew in Vilna for exceptional scholarship and for powerful musar sermons that inspired young men to greater piety. At his musar house, regular people, not just scholars, came often between afternoon and evening prayer to study classic musar texts like the eighteenth-century *Mesillat Yesharim* or the eleventh-century *Hovot ha-Levavot* and to hear him preach.<sup>39</sup> We hear Salanter reflecting on the importance of this study time and encouraging his students to continue supporting this kind of study, even after Salanter left Vilna. As he wrote in 1849:

... the first thing that we must do is to strengthen these who are weak, by guiding them to the *Musar* house. There, musar must be studied with insight and intelligence, with sincerity of heart, and with lips aflame. Its study should be affected by the continuous repetition of our Sage's fiery statement in this area – each person according to his deficiencies.<sup>40</sup>

Salanter not only encouraged people to study at fixed times every day, but he also emphasized study that stimulated self-reflection on aspects of character that needed correction. Each person had their own "curriculum," but all engaged the project of self-reflection with sincerity and fervor. Salanter especially sought out leading figures in the community and encouraged his students to recruit businessmen and scions of prestigious families. Salanter knew that if the well regarded became involved, others would follow.<sup>41</sup> He

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<sup>38</sup> This description is based on Isaac Blazer's recollections of Salanter's sermons in Yitzhak Blazer, "Netivot Or," *Ohr Israel*, 442-443. See Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 233.

<sup>39</sup> Etkes quotes Hillel Noah Steinschneider as the source of this information. Steinschneider lived in Vilna from 1829 to 1904. He was a researcher on the life of the Jewish community and its personalities. He published *Ir Vilna* in 1900.

<sup>40</sup> Salanter, "Letter Five," *Ohr Yisrael*, 171. The first five letters that are part of the *Ohr Yisrael* collection were written by Salanter during 1849 to his first discipleship group based in Vilna. See Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 111. Salanter wrote about using these techniques in letters that he sent to his disciples. See for example, "Letter Three" in the collection *Ohr Yisrael*, 160.

It is instructive to contrast Salanter with one of his contemporaries, R. Hayyim of Volozhin. Norman Lamm in *Torah Lishmah: In the Works of R. Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1989), 289, while disagreeing with an understanding of R. Hayyim as a supporter of the *Musar* Movement, notes that R. Hayyim didn't oppose its use with lay people. R.

had a keen sensitivity to what motivated people and he had no compunction about getting people to engage in musar study, even if it was for the wrong reason.<sup>42</sup>

Immanuel Etkes describes Salanter's theological framework as self-consciously traditionalist and a "conscious retreat" from kabbalistic theologies.<sup>43</sup> He avoided the kind of speculative theosophic reflection on the godhead that was common among kabbalists and did not try to motivate *halakhic* action by suggesting that it can affect the upper worlds. The image of God he taught was the transcendent and personal God of classical rabbinic thought, the God who is providential, who rewards and punishes, who reaches out to humans through His revelation of Torah. Salanter explicitly taught his students to avoid wasting time with philosophical speculation on the nature of the godhead. "What practical difference does it make in which heaven the Holy One Blessed be He sits? One thing is clear to me – that they will beat one with whips! And that it will hurt very much! And the beatings will be fierce! This I know clearly—so what else do I need?"<sup>44</sup> Salanter sometimes uses violent imagery like the example here to talk about suffering for sin that will come in the afterlife. His logic suggests that in light of the severity of the potential punishment, people should focus their energy on cultivating personal piety and character. Theosophical speculation just cannot be as important when cast in that light.

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Hayyim saw *Musar* as too simplistic, as literature that is "beneath true scholars;" but for those people who need this kind of inspiration, it was acceptable. His expectation was that if *Musar* study did its work, it would inspire people to study Torah and then no longer be needed. While many elite Torah scholars in Salanter's time agreed with R. Hayyim and took a similarly disdainful approach to *Musar* literature and to Salanter's *Musar* movement, Lamm notes that this piety movement was credited by later scholars as a powerful "antidote to the growing Haskalah movement" (307).

<sup>42</sup> This approach is in keeping with a Talmudic teaching found in B. *Pesachim* 50b: "Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: A person should always engage in Torah and mitzvot, even if he does so not for their own sake (i.e., not with the right intention), because through doing them not for their own sake he will come to do them for their own sake." Translation mine. See: [https://www.sefaria.org/Pesachim.50b.5?ven=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_English&vhe=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_Vocalized\\_Punctuated\\_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Pesachim.50b.5?ven=William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&vhe=William_Davidson_Edition_-_Vocalized_Punctuated_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>43</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> H. E. Zaitchik, *Sefer ha-me'orot ha-gedolim* (New York, 1953), in the section on R. Israel Lipkin of Salant, sec. 185, quoted by Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 94.

Salanter spoke about God in ways the average Jew could understand and could be motivated by.<sup>45</sup> The focus of his teaching was on how to set up a proper relationship between God, human beings, and the world. His teachings are accessible based on biblical and rabbinic narrative theology. His authority did not come from his esoteric knowledge but rather from his living example of piety, integrity, confidence, and passionate style of communication.<sup>46</sup>

His behavior demonstrated a careful attentiveness to the interpersonal commandments. He was known to practice leniencies in his fulfilling of commandments between a person and God if that was what was needed to fulfill a commandment toward his fellow.<sup>47</sup> He also developed a reputation for being especially concerned for the sufferings of the sick, the poor, widows, orphans, and others who lived on the margins of society. His

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<sup>45</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 93, summarizes Salanter's theological approach in this way:

The image of God in his writings is a strictly transcendent and personal one: He is the God who reveals Himself to humankind in His Torah and His commandments; who is providential, who rewards and punishes. Just as He is not the God of the philosophers, the object of speculation and of intellectual apprehension, so is Salanter's image of God remote from that of the Kabbalah. The attempt to influence the upper worlds or the desire to cling to God in the mystical sense play no role in his religious thought. Religious activity and meaning are defined by the concepts of commandment and transgression, reward and punishment, this world and the World to come. The essence of Divine service thus consists in response and obedience to the mitzvot per se.

<sup>46</sup> R. Yitzhak Blazer gives a wide variety of accounts of R. Salanter's righteous and pious activity in his admittedly hagiographic introduction to Rabbi Israel Salanter's life published as *Netivot Or*, Paths of Light, in *Ohr Yisrael*, [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Netivot\\_Ohr?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Netivot_Ohr?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi). An example of the intensity of Salanter's own commitment to integrity is his response to his youngest child's abandonment of Jewish practice and success as a mathematician. When the publisher of a local Kovna Jewish newspaper, *Ha-Maggid*, spoke in glowing terms about the successes of Yom Tov Lipkin and credited R. Israel Salanter with encouraging his son to acquire "wisdom in the university, so that Torah and wisdom might be united in his son, to the glory of our people," Salanter felt that he could not accept the praise. He wrote a letter to the editor in which he said that he was obligated by his commitment to truth to explain that he was saddened by his son's chosen path and that he hoped someone could help change his son's desire away from it. Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 314.

<sup>47</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 167, offers an example of R. Israel being willing to eat gentile bread during a trip because the person who paid for the trip told him not to do anything extra stringent that might affect his health. Salanter ate the gentile bread rather than packing Jewish bread for the journey so as to avoid violating the prohibition against theft and deception which he felt he would be violating if he kept the stringency against eating gentile bread.

students preserved stories of his extraordinary care.<sup>48</sup> In one case he reprimanded the charity wardens until they found funds to put an orphan boy into school, telling them that it is permissible to sell a Torah scroll in order to pay for study.<sup>49</sup>

Salanter hoped the *Musar* movement would encourage greater self-reflection, internalization of Torah teaching, and ethical living for the average Jew. Complicating their understanding of reality with esoteric theology was not on Salanter's agenda. This framework never changed, even after Salanter left Vilna and after he spent many years working among assimilated German Jews. Even when he was willing to make common cause with less traditional outreach groups, like the modern orthodox movement of Hirsch and Hildesheimer, his commitment to traditional ways of life and thought did not waver. He worked with others in Germany when he saw their approach as valuable for reaching the assimilated, but his support for educational endeavors which tried to blend Torah study with modern secular subjects was only ever situational.<sup>50</sup>

Salanter left Vilna in the autumn of 1848 after refusing to work at a new hybrid yeshiva high school founded by Jewish proponents of enlightenment ideas who were allied with local government officials.<sup>51</sup> After refusing the offer of a job to run this new yeshiva, it seems that he no longer felt it safe to live in Vilna. But in leaving he did not abandon his students, nor the spiritual revival work he had started in Vilna. He wrote several letters to

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<sup>48</sup> See R. Yitzhak Blazer, "Netivot Or," *Ohr Yisrael*.

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Netivot\\_Ohr?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Netivot_Ohr?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi)

<sup>49</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 168.

<sup>50</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 247.

<sup>51</sup> Salanter did not agree with the Maskilim's methods, refusing either to give his approval nor to work at the hybrid Jewish school created in Vilna under their guidance. But he did share their concern for improving the lives of average Jews. Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 173, describes it this way:

Salanter, who did not accept the radical solutions proposed by the Maskilim, suggested instead a path that drew upon the immanent sources of Judaism itself. While he did not attempt to alter the objective circumstances from which the difficulties of his generation stemmed, he hoped that by imposing proper ethical norms in the life of society, it would be possible to relive somewhat the weight of their distress and blunt its sharpness.

his disciples between 1848 and 1849 expressing his hope that they would continue the work he began among them.<sup>52</sup> We can see from those letters that he hoped they would carry on the practices he taught them and that they would continue to engage others.<sup>53</sup> We have no evidence that the musar house survived for very long after his departure, but his work in Vilna marks the beginning of the style of teaching and practices of the movement he would be credited with creating.<sup>54</sup>

By the early 1850's Salanter seems to have built up a new set of disciples, this time at a prayer house in Kovna. He focused on persuading regular working people to participate in his movement by scaffolding the process, encouraging regular brief daily study of musar literature between the afternoon and evening prayers. Previously musar literature was mostly of interest to people who wanted a rigorous devotional practice. Salanter created lower rungs on the ladder of spiritual ascent by trying to make musar study convenient and by promoting its benefits, even in small doses.<sup>55</sup> It appears that his work there was more

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<sup>52</sup> Goldberg places letters 1-5 in this time period. *Israel Salanter*, 331-332.

<sup>53</sup> Salanter, "Letter One," *Ohr Yisrael*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 177.

<sup>55</sup> Salanter advocated setting up spaces where people would study musar literature together on a regular basis. He knew that social dynamics could reinforce the practice so he sought to use them. Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, "Letter One," 147, writes, "...designate a fixed time on the holy Sabbath, to gather together..., and contemplate how you might influence the prominent members of the community to study musar, so that the masses will follow their example and go in their footsteps." Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.1.8?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.1.8?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en). Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, "Letter Six," 179, writes, "The walk to the *Musar* house is a very easy matter, especially on Shabbos – and this is true even for one who is immersed in worldly affairs...it is preferable that the *Musar* house be set up in close proximity to the study house, or in an adjacent room, so that he will not have any opposition to learning *musar* on the grounds that the place is far from the study house." Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.6.7?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.6.7?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en). Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, "Letter Six," 182, writes, "A person is certainly capable of going to the musar house on our holy shabbat, where he can engage in ardent musar study. Likewise, he can go there several times a week, even if only for a few minutes. He will thereby reinforce what he learned previously, so that the impression on his *ta'avah* will not be nullified during the interval between shabbat and shabbat. Such a program is easy to undertake and yields abundant fruit, aiding one to acquire the investigative power to overcome his *ta'avah*. At the very least, it will grant him the self-control to "turn from evil and do good" (Ps. 34:15). Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.6.12?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.6.12?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

successful than it had been in Vilna. He attracted students who would later go on to found Musar yeshivas. He also attracted support from leading business and land holders, influencers, who came to pray and study musar with Salanter. Up through the late 1800's, Kovna was a place that supported the spread of musar teaching and supported the Musar yeshivas even through a period of scandal in 1897.<sup>56</sup>

Over nine years, Salanter preached, taught, and led an advanced study group in Kovna known as the Nevyozer Kloiz. His disciplines, during this time, began to spread his teachings and methods, setting up five or six musar houses in cities nearby. Musar houses were one of Salanter's innovative educational methods, and even though his goals were deeply traditional, his new educational methods were not universally appreciated. By the time that Salanter left Kovna in 1857, there was a loyal opposition to Salanter's movement that objected to the practice of *hitpa'alut* in musar houses. *Hitpa'alut* was a style of chanting musar texts that was accompanied by strong emotion and with gestures. I will introduce the practice more fully below. While some people found the practice odd, the strongest objections to Salanter's burgeoning Musar Movement was the perception that they created a separatist community. Salanter's opponents felt that by creating a special group he was implicitly critiquing the whole of the Jewish people, suggesting that those who were not involved in this new kind of musar study were not committed to ethical behavior and awe of

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<sup>56</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 181. Etkes suggests that Salanter was more successful in Kovna than in Vilna for a few reasons. He was able to implement what he had learned from his work in Vilna. He started on building momentum as soon as he arrived so his nine years there were spent more efficiently than his time in Vilna. Kovna was also a city that had only recently gathered a large Jewish population. In the eighteenth century only a very small number of Jews were allowed by the city townsfolk to live there. But when Russia annexed the area in 1798, the tzar removed these restrictions. Many more Jews came to Kovna over the next few decades. Even by the 1850's, Kovna did not yet have a strong well-established local custom based around Torah study. It was therefore more open to unconventional ideas. Norman Lamm, *Torah U'Madda* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1990), 305, records that even though there was a lot of resistance to *Musar* at first, it became very successful by the late nineteenth century, so much so that R. Blazer is condemned by a rabbinical convocation in 1897 for influencing young men to study musar instead of halakha.

God. In response to their discomfort with his emphasis on character formation, his critics suggested that his emphasis on musar study implicitly denigrated the value of studying Hebrew Bible, Rabbinic Literature, and Jewish codes. For *Mitnagdic* society in the nineteenth century, the intellectual study of that corpus was the pinnacle of learning. The notion that musar texts and emotionally powerful reading techniques were central mechanisms for religious formation went against the privileged place of intellectual Talmud study.<sup>57</sup> Even if Salanter didn't mean to subvert the centrality of traditional Torah learning, his carefully articulated vision of piety displaced the previous definition of expertise. This threatened the status of other religious authorities.<sup>58</sup>

When Salanter left Lithuania in 1858, he left behind much of what would solidify his legacy. He left for Germany for health reasons. He was seeking treatment for depression. But after discovering the deep alienation of German Jewry from Torah, he decided to stay. He did outreach to Jewish young people studying at local universities by offering informal lectures on topics like Bible and Talmud. He worked at rebuilding structures of traditional Jewish life on the Lithuanian model. He started giving sermons every Friday evening. He

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<sup>57</sup> Salanter did not teach that *hitpa'anut*, an intellectual and intensely emotional form of study, was superior, but he did teach that it was crucial for accomplishing the goal of existence, the wholehearted service of God. Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, "Letter Thirty." Salanter encouraged students to take time to study in a mode that was different from the common rational intellectualism or the practical halachic learning. Salanter valued all these ways of learning, describing them in this way, "The intellect, this is its power and virtue: to overflow all its brims, to expand as it proceeds, to search and critically analyze every facet of every aspect [of any viewpoint]. Not so impassioned speech and thought [*hitpa'anut*], this is their way: to concentrate all of one's soul-forces on the objective toward which the rays of impassioned speech and thought [*hitpa'anut*] point, until nearly all of the remaining soul-forces are momentarily forgotten and extinguished, commensurate with the intensity of the impassioned speech and thought" (Translated by and quoted in Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 118, from Salanter, "Letter Thirty"). In other words, intellectual engagement and impassioned speech each have their products, they are each valuable modes of study. Goldberg agrees that Salanter did not seek to displace Torah study as the study of normative halakha, but he did want to add to the practice, believing that Torah study needed a renaissance. Salanter believed that Torah study could be more powerful for Jews if it was the place where they could encounter "the perfect, inspiring Divine will," and catch sight of the ideal human. This would give them access to a depth of power in it that is transformational and more than what they find when they approach it with merely intellectual goals. For more on this idea in Salanter's thought, see Goldberg, 91.

<sup>58</sup> Opposition was led by R. Leib Shapira. For more on his reasons for rejecting Salanter, see Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 195-197.

founded a Talmud study group that met for many years. He organized Torah study programs for youth. He met with people to offer personal counseling and support. He edited and published a Torah periodical, a medium used by academics but with content that promoted traditional Torah study.<sup>59</sup> And he pushed back against the prejudice among German Jews against Lithuanian Jewry. He began to travel also to major cities like Berlin, Frankfurt, and Hamburg where he would stay for several weeks in the homes of admirers and friends who would assist him in his educational outreach endeavors within their communities.<sup>60</sup> Salanter's life and work remained focused in Germany, with a brief two-year stint in Paris, until his death in 1883 at 73 years of age.

During the later years of his life, Salanter mostly worked among and alongside Jews who shared neither his piety nor his Torah lifestyle. He ministered as a rabbinic leader to emigres from Russia and Poland, made common cause with proponents of modern orthodoxy and religious Zionism, and taught among assimilated western Jews. While his later years were spent in great activity, it was his work deepening the piety of his young students in Kovna through musar teaching that created the disciples who would carry on his vision. They built Musar yeshivas in Lithuania that carried on his teachings among a still traditional Jewish society. They turned the efforts of one man into a movement.

Salanter remained connected to his students even after leaving for Germany. They wrote to him seeking advice for their work spreading musar practices and for advice on their personal practice. These letters and a few others he wrote at an earlier stages in his life are a primary source of knowledge about Salanter's thought, along with a short treatise called *Iggeret HaMusar*.<sup>61</sup> Twenty-two of his collected letters, a few essays that he wrote and

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<sup>59</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 246.

<sup>60</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 243.

<sup>61</sup> *Iggeret HaMusar* first appeared in print in Koenigsberg, East Prussia in 1858 appended to a publication of *Tomer Devorah*. It was written during Salanter's time in Kovno. It is his most popular work. By the 1980's it was reissued forty-eight times. Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 313.

published in *Tevunah*, and his *Musar* treatise were published together in Vilna by R. Isaac Blazer in 1900.<sup>62</sup> The first five letters and *Iggeret HaMusar* were written right after Salanter left Vilna (1843-1849), one (Letter 21) comes from his time in Kovno (1850-1858), and the rest are either undated or come from his German period. The essays from *Tevunah* were organized into the section described as letters even though they were originally articles. They are known now as letters twenty-three through thirty-one. This collection, which also includes an introduction and epilogue by R. Blazer in which he offers both a summary of Salanter's thought and a profile of some of his pious actions as recounted by his followers, is known as *Ohr Yisrael*.<sup>63</sup> This collection of texts serves as the primary source for my investigation of Salanter's theological anthropology.<sup>64</sup>

In particular, "Letter Thirty" in the collection *Ohr Yisrael*<sup>65</sup> offers some of the best material for understanding the telos of human life, as Salanter articulated it, as well as the path to its achievement. Here, Salanter writes about his understanding of human potential and the path of transformation, beginning by describing the ideal human character. Letter Thirty also includes Salanter's prescriptions for how to go about attaining the goal of life he

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<sup>62</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 313.

<sup>63</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 12 and 331-337.

<sup>64</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 311, argues that Salanter's teachings developed over the course of his life and his letters and teachings need to be read with an appreciation for when they were written. He criticizes Etkes for offering a synthetic interpretation of Salanter's thought that uses writings from different periods to help elucidate one another. Goldberg thinks that there is significant development in Salanter's thought over the course of his life. Goldberg also critiques Etkes for not sufficiently engaging Salanter's full German period writings. While I do not disagree that it can be enlightening to understand how Salanter's thinking developed over the course of his life, I do not see such a vast difference in his thinking from the early period to late. Instead, it seems like his thought continues to develop along the same lines, getting a bit more complex but without a profound change in approach. This consideration is also not particularly relevant here, as I am interested in only the part of his thought that touches on his theories about *tikkun ha'yetzter*, discussed below. He presents this most comprehensively in an essay originally published in *Tevunah* but also published as "Letter Thirty" in *Ohr Yisrael*. Goldberg, 101-104, places "Letter Thirty" within the writings from Salanter's early German period (1859-1869).

<sup>65</sup> Israel Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael: The Classic Writings of Rav Yisrael Salanter and his Disciple Rav Yitzchak Blazer*, ed. Eli Linas, trans. Rabbi Zvi Miller (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 2004), 306-351. Translation mine. For a Hebrew text of the letter see: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.2?yhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=en&with=About&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.2?yhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=en&with=About&lang2=en).

articulates. And he addresses, in particular, the role of desire, introducing techniques for forming desire.

In other words, Salanter articulates in this letter a vision for human flourishing. As I will show, Salanter manages to be significantly aspirational without violating “the maximal demand.” At the same time, his vision is deeply rooted in traditional Jewish anthropology, making it useful as an articulation of the goal toward which Jewish liturgy should be understood to form people’s desires. I will therefore use Salanter’s anthropology, his desire forming technique, and his explanation of the ideal as elements for building a method that will help me consider Jewish liturgy ascetically. The rest of this chapter introduces Salanter’s vision for human flourishing, his theological anthropology, and the technique for re-forming desire that Salanter developed and that became a key feature of the Musar movement.

#### 4.2 ISRAEL SALANTER’S VISION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

In “Letter Thirty” of the *Ohr Yisrael* collection, Salanter teaches that God’s purpose in creating the world was for the sake of the creation of *adam hashalem*, the whole man. He bases this teaching on a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 30b. To properly explain what he is doing in this teaching, I cite Salanter’s text but, for clarity, will expand his quotation of *Shabbat* 30b. The text in bold is from Salanter’s letter and the part that is not in bold is the expanded part of the quotation from the passage of Talmud he cites. Salanter writes:

וְהִנֵּה בְּרִיאַת הַתְּבִל (הָאָרֶץ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ) תְּכַלִּית אָדָם הַשָּׁלֵם יְרָא אֶת ה' וְשׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹתָיו. כְּמֵאִמֵר  
רַבּוֹתֵינוּ ז"ל :  
סוֹפוֹ דְּבַרֵי תוֹרָה, דְּכַתִּיב: "סוֹף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים יְרָא וְאֶת מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמֹר כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאָדָם."  
מֵאִי כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאָדָם אָמַר רַבִּי אֱלֵעָזָר אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ לֹא נִבְרָא אֱלָא בְּשִׁבְלֵי זֶה.

**Behold the creation of the world (the land and all that is in it) was for the purpose of the whole man (*adam hashalem*), one who fears God and keeps His commandments.**

**As our Sages said:** [Ecclesiastes] ends with words of Torah, as it is written, “At the end, having heard it all, fear God and keep His commandments, for this is every man (*kol ha’adam*).” (Eccl 12:13)<sup>66</sup>

**What does “*kol ha’adam*” mean? Rabbi Elazar said, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said, “The whole world was only created for this [kind of person]’.”<sup>67</sup>**

According to this teaching, *adam hashalem*, is at the most basic level someone who “fears God and keeps God’s commandments.” Salanter presents this person as the reason that God created everything. He also summarizes his vision for the ends of Jewish life as “to fear God and keep God’s commandments.” This, he teaches, is the reason for the existence of human beings, the reason for which God created. This teaching, on the surface, is very traditional. But there is something deeper going on in Salanter’s interpretation of this rabbinic passage. He sees in this norm a profound challenge that he believes he can help people to address. He reads Ecclesiastes 12:13 as forging a link between the inner emotional world and outward behavior, between the fear of God and the doing of God’s will. And this, Salanter sees as the challenge.

Immanuel Etkes describes Salanter’s vision of “the whole man” as the formation of people who are capable of meeting the normative demands of *halakha* with perfect motivation.<sup>68</sup> Previous musar literature had focused on describing ethical norms, explaining what those norms require. Salanter’s writings do not define norms; instead, they address, Etkes says, “the gap between cognitive knowledge, on the one hand, and psychological

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<sup>66</sup> In translations of this passage, Ecclesiastes 12:13, there is some variance in how *kol ha’adam* is translated. I tried to offer a very simple rendering in my translation above. In the RSV the final line is translated as “for this is the whole duty of man.” The NJPS, 1985 version says, “For this applies to all mankind.” But the 1917 version of JPS translates the line as “for this is the whole man.” This translation matches the Steinsaltz English translation of B. Talmud *Shabbat* 30a which says, “for this is the whole man.” This JPS translation of *kol ha’adam* fits better with Salanter’s use of the passage. The way Salanter uses the text implies an overlap in the valence of meaning between *kol ha’adam* and *adam hashalem*.

<sup>67</sup> This is the conclusion of the quotation from B. Talmud *Shabbat* 30b.

<sup>68</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 97.

motivation, on the other.”<sup>69</sup> *Adam hashalem* is someone who not only knows and acknowledges the validity of God’s commandments, but is also a person able to live in accordance with those commands because his deep emotional drives and patterns of behavior do not undermine his conscious cognitive commitments.<sup>70</sup> Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, a scholar and practitioner of musar, in his intellectual history of Israel Salanter’s *Musar* teachings, describes *adam hashalem* as someone who is “internally harmonious and externally observant.”<sup>71</sup> *Adam hashalem* is someone whose inner drives and external behavior are united. Salanter describes this way of being as an experience of an overriding singular desire for God that taps into even the energy that is concerned with the self.

וְכִשְׁהוּא בְּמִצַּב תְּקוּן הַמַּדּוּת וְתִאֲוֹת כַּחוֹת נִפְשׁוֹ, עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִחַפְצוּ רַק אֶת אֲשֶׁר ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מֵאֲתָם,  
נִקְרָא עוֹבֵד ה' בְּיֶצֶר הָרָע, הֵם כַּחוֹת הַנִּפְשׁוּיּוֹת אֲשֶׁר עֲצֻמוֹתָם לְרָע, וְהָאֵדָם תִּקְנָם לְמַתַּק מְרִירוֹתָם  
לְהַפְּכָם לְטוֹב

When he [*adam hashalem*] has repaired his character traits and the yearnings of his soul-forces, such that they only desire that which God requires of him, he is called ‘a servant of God with his selfish urge’ (*yetzer ha’ra*). These are the soul-forces whose essence is evil, but the person has repaired them, sweetening their bitterness and turning them toward good.<sup>72</sup>

Salanter understands *adam hashalem* as someone whose desire for doing the will of God is so great that his innate desire to be selfish and to resist the will of God is itself redirected.

The inner urge toward selfishness becomes a source of energy toward the loving service of

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<sup>69</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 96.

<sup>70</sup> Salanter’s attention to cultivating the quality of wholeness as a goal of Jewish existence does not come out of nowhere. His teachings about inner forces are different from, but continuous with, teachings in rabbinic literature about the inclination for good and the inclination for selfishness/wickedness. See *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* Version A 16, 62-63. In that text Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus are depicted as having overcome the inner division between the good yetzer and selfish yetzer. For analysis of this source see Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 106ff.

<sup>71</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 146.

<sup>72</sup> Salanter, “Letter 30,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 321. Translation mine. For Hebrew source see: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.20?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.20?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en).

God. This vision for the ideal is a description of a kind of inner and outer harmony, a unity of desire, intellect, will, and action, all in love and service of God.

Salanter's teaching about this ideal includes both an integrated way of being, described above, and a robust vision for the character of *adam hashalem*. In "Letter Thirty" Salanter elaborates:

וְהִיתָר כְּבֹד בְּבַחֲיַנְתָּ הַתְּקוּן. הוּא בְּדַבַּר הַמַּדוּת. כִּי זֶה כָּלֵל גְּדוּל בַּמַּדוּת. שְׂרַב מַדוּת הַטּוֹבוֹת. הֵמָּה רַק בְּמָה שְׂנוּגָע לְהָאָדָם בְּעַצְמוֹ. אֲכֵן בְּמָה שְׂנוּגָע לְחֵבְרוֹ. הַחֹב לְהַשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בְּכָל עֵז בְּהַפּוּכָה. כְּמוֹ לְבָרַח מִן הַכְּבוֹד הִיא מִדָּה יְקָרָה. כְּמֵאֲמָרָם ז"ל כִּי תֵאֵוֹת הַכְּבוֹד תּוֹצִיא אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעוֹלָם. אֲכֵן בְּמָה שְׂנוּגָע לְחֵבְרוֹ. אָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ ז"ל אֵיזְהוּ מְכַבֵּד מְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

The most difficult aspect of the repair is in regard to character traits. This is a major principle regarding positive character traits, they concern only the person himself. Indeed, in that which concerns his fellow, the obligation is to use all [his] strength to reverse it. For example, to flee from honor is a precious character trait, as the Sages teach: "The desire (*ta'avah*) for honor removes a man from the world." However, in that which concerns his fellow, the Sages said: "Who is honored? He who honors others."<sup>73</sup>

The ideal way of being includes a capacity to discern properly how to apply virtues. It is not just that an *adam hashalem* experiences a kind of wholeness of heart in divine service; he must also know how to treat others because this ethical element is not peripheral to Torah, but rather it is utterly central. If a person has developed true humility, she will rush to honor others even while not needing to receive honor herself. There is no virtue in, for example, treating someone else with disrespect in the name of helping them to cultivate humility.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, Salanter similarly suggests that abstinence is a praiseworthy personal quality, but when a guest comes, a person must be willing to run out to the marketplace to search for what will truly satisfy his guest.<sup>75</sup> The ideal is a person who is

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<sup>73</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 316. Translation mine. Hebrew text can be found here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.13?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.13?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>74</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 316.

<sup>75</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 317.

able to differentiate between the qualities she aspires to have for herself and her treatment of others.

Salanter writes about Abraham as an exemplar of this way of being. Abraham's blessing from God enabled him to attain total repair of his soul-forces.<sup>76</sup> In Gen. 17:1, we read that God appeared to Abraham and said, *הִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תָּמִים*, "Walk before me and be perfect."<sup>77</sup> The word *תָּמִים* (*tamim*, perfect) can have a variety of meanings including, "unblemished," like a biblical offering, or "upright," "honest," "simple," "complete," "full," or "entire." Salanter reads *tamim* as implying the perfection of complete wholeness and repair of inner soul forces. He explains what this means via a comparison between Abraham and Noah. In Gen. 6:8-9, we read *נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְדוֹרֹתָיו* "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation."<sup>78</sup> The Hebrew word translated here as "blameless" is *tamim*.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 323. Salanter quotes Bereshit Rabbah 59:7, "And God blessed Abraham with everything' (Gen. 24:2). This means that He granted him mastery over his *yetzer ha'ra*." Hebrew text available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.23?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.23?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en). Abraham's blessing was that he was gifted with both repair of the *yetzer ha'ra* and the will power to subjugate the *yetzer ha'ra* ("Letter Thirty," 325). At the end of this letter Salanter describes how a person can merit this kind of blessing from God. He points to a particular practice of emotionally potent, repetitive, reading of Torah called *hitpa'alut* that can lead to this divine blessing ("Letter Thirty," 345).

<sup>77</sup> Translation mine. There are a variety of ways of translating this verse fragment. Some notable options include: NRSV, 1989, "Walk before men and be blameless." CJPS, 2006, "Walk in my ways and be blameless;" Everett Fox, 1995, "Walk in my presence! And be wholehearted!"; Koren Jerusalem Bible, "walk before Me, and be perfect." Perhaps particularly useful for understanding Salanter's reading of this passage is the translation from R. Charles Kahane published in 1963 entitled *Torah Yesha'rah*. His "translation" is explicitly an interpretive translation based on rabbinic and medieval Jewish writings. See his introduction to the translation for more about his sources. He renders this passage as, "Follow in My path and you will reach the highest level of perfection."

<sup>78</sup> NRSV, 1989.

<sup>79</sup> The fact that both Noah and Abraham are called *תָּמִים* generated much comparison between the two figures in classical rabbinic midrash. Because the Torah says "in his generation," Noah is understood to have a blamelessness that is only relative to the wickedness of his generation, whereas Abraham is objectively *תָּמִים*. His perfection was complete, a standard that all can follow. See Rashi on *בְּדוֹרֹתָיו* ("in his generation") which can be found here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.6.9?ven=The\\_Contemporary\\_Torah\\_Jewish\\_Publication\\_Society\\_2006&vhe=Miqra\\_according\\_to\\_the\\_Masorah&lang=bi&aliyot=0&p2=Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.6.9.2&ven2=Pentateuch\\_with\\_Rashi%27s\\_commentary\\_by\\_M.\\_Rosenbaum\\_and\\_A.M.\\_Silbermann\\_1929-1934&vhe2=Pentateuch\\_with\\_Rashi%27s\\_commentary\\_by\\_M.\\_Rosenbaum\\_and\\_A.M.\\_Silbermann\\_1929-1934&lang2=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.6.9?ven=The_Contemporary_Torah_Jewish_Publication_Society_2006&vhe=Miqra_according_to_the_Masorah&lang=bi&aliyot=0&p2=Rashi_on_Genesis.6.9.2&ven2=Pentateuch_with_Rashi%27s_commentary_by_M._Rosenbaum_and_A.M._Silbermann_1929-1934&vhe2=Pentateuch_with_Rashi%27s_commentary_by_M._Rosenbaum_and_A.M._Silbermann_1929-1934&lang2=bi).

Salanter interprets the difference between these two figures as being a difference in the level of internal self-transformation of their soul forces. In the case of Noah, he was able to get to a level that Salanter calls, *kibbush ha'yetzer*, of subjugating the selfish inclination. Abraham attained an even higher level, that of *tikkun ha'yetzer*, i.e., of repairing his selfish inclination. This is why the Torah recounts that God said, "walk before me" when talking to Abraham, but describes Noah only as walking "WITH God."<sup>80</sup> In Salanter's interpretation, God could not trust Noah to walk independently because his inner selfish forces were only under control; they were not repaired. In contrast, God could fully trust Abraham because his inner forces were healed.<sup>81</sup>

One might think that if not even Noah could attain to this kind of ideal, can it really be an ideal that can be used to talk about the goal of a Jewish asceticism? However, Salanter does not set up the ideal of repair of our inner forces as something that is beyond the attainment of regular people. He argues very clearly that this goal is one to which all are called.

...אדם נבְּרָא לְתַקְלִית זֹ. וְכָל אָדָם בְּיָדוֹ וּבְכַחוֹ לְתַקֵּן כָּל כְּחוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ הַמְּשֻׁתָּפִים עִם הַמְרוֹ. לְבַד הַחֵלֶק שֶׁנִּצְטוּהָ אַבְרָהָם לְכַרְתּוֹ:

<sup>80</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 308-309. Hebrew text available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>81</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 309. Translation mine. "Since Noah was not commanded concerning circumcision, he did not have the ability to inquire after true rectification, only the subjugation of his evil inclination. And that [subjugation came only] with the help of the Holy One blessed be He, as it says in the Talmud (*Sukkah* 52b), "A person's inclination shows itself mighty over him every day, and if not for the help of the Holy One Blessed be He, a person would not be able to [overcome it]. This is the meaning of the verse: "Noah walked with God." But Abraham, after he removed his blemish [i.e., his foreskin], all the soul forces were repaired. And he was able to proceed on his own, with a flute rejoicing, observing the way of the Lord. This is the meaning of "Walk before Me..."

כִּי נִחַ (לְפִי עֵרְכּוֹ) יַעֲזֵן לֹא נִצְטוּהָ עַל הַמִּילָה. לֹא הָיָה בְּיָדוֹ לְבֹא לְבַחֲשֵׁי תַקוּן אֲמִתִּי רַק בְּבַחֲשֵׁי כּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יִצְרוֹ. וְהוּא בְּעֵזֶר ה' יִתְבָּרֵךְ. כְּמֵאֲמָרָם ז"ל (סְפָה נֹב): יִצְרוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מִתְגַּבֵּר עָלָיו בְּכָל יוֹם וְאֵלְמָלָא הַקְדוֹשׁ-בְּרוּךְ-הוּא שְׁעוֹזָרוֹ אֵינוֹ יִכּוֹל לוֹ ... וְזֶהוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים וְכוּ'. אֲבָל אַבְרָהָם אַחֲרֵי הַעֲבֵרָת הַמּוּם נִתְקַנּוּ כָּל כְּחוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ. וּמֵעַצְמוֹ כְּהוֹלֵךְ בְּחֵלֶל שֶׁשׁ לְשֹׁמֵר דְּרָךְ ה'. זֶהוּ הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי:

The Hebrew text can be found here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

Humans were created for this purpose. Every person has the ability (lit. in his hand) and strength to repair all the soul-forces that partner with his physicality, except for the part that Abraham was commanded to cut off.<sup>82</sup> Every person is called to the work of perfecting their inner drives.<sup>83</sup> As Salanter says elsewhere, “Do not say the Almighty made me this way, thus I am who I am.... The entire purpose of every person’s existence is to purge every negative trait and character attribute from his heart.”<sup>84</sup> Everyone, not just Abraham, is called to serve God with perfect wholeness. The goal of Jewish life is thus to become like Abraham, someone who attained a perfected state of inner wholeness through the repair of the inner forces of his soul, someone for whose sake all of creation exists.

#### 4.2.1 Yetzer Ha’Ra and Yetzer Ha’Tov

What are these inner forces? In what way are they in need of repair? Salanter not only offered a vision for an “end” of Jewish life well lived, he also taught techniques for developing one’s character and forming inner soul-forces. He based his techniques on a theologically rooted vision of the human condition. Salanter inherited from rabbinic tradition an anthropology that reflects deeply on the relationship between internal intention, proper feeling, and external action. In Talmudic discourse the inner life of humans was understood primarily through metaphors of conflict: the human heart is a battleground between the *yetzer ha’ra* and the *yetzer ha’tov*.<sup>85</sup> The conflict is over our

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<sup>82</sup> Salanter, “Letter 30,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 311. Translation mine. Hebrew text available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.7?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.7?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>83</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, “Letter 30,” 323, describes this state of being *adam hashalem* as something that Abraham attained, but also as something that was a gift from God.

<sup>84</sup> Salanter, “Letter 30,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 307-308. “וְזֶה כֹּל הָאָדָם לְשֵׁרֵשׁ מִלְּבָבוֹ כֹּל תְּכוּנָה וּמִדָּה רָעָה.” Hebrew text available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>85</sup> Ishai Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Ha’ra and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) is an excellent recent introduction to the

actions, intentions, and desires. In this section I introduce the role of desire in motivating human action.

Salanter presents a rather pessimistic view of unperfected human nature. As humans, the default orientation of our soul-forces is not perfectly aligned to manifest our godly calling. In his third letter to his earliest disciple group in Vilna he writes:

ועתה אם נחפש מצבנו רחוקים אנחנו מאד ממרכז החיים, עבודתנו לא לה' היא, רב העתים בהשכה  
נהלה, למלאות בטננו, לרות תאותנו השפלים והנבזים

Now, if we evaluate our situation, we are very far from the central purpose of life. Our service is not for God. Most of the time we walk in darkness, filling our stomachs and quenching our inferior and lowly desires.<sup>86</sup> Humans, when unreflective and in their natural state, exhibit a basic selfishness and concern for mundane gratification. This is the state of being ruled by the *yetzer ha'ra*.

According to classical Jewish anthropology, each one of us is susceptible to sin because of the *yetzer ha'ra*.<sup>87</sup> Often translated as the evil inclination or bad inclination, this force within

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rabbinic understandings of this early conflict. The rabbis describe the conflict as between the *yetzer ha'tov* (inclination for good) and the *yetzer ha'ra* (inclination for evil). For more on the amoraic-period descriptions of the *yetzer* as an enemy, thief, trickster, a national enemy and enemy of Torah observance see chapter 4 in *Demonic Desires*. Also see Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *The Making of a Sage*, 98-101.

<sup>86</sup> Salanter, "Letter Three," *Ohr Yisrael*, 157. Translation mine. Hebrew can be found here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.3.5?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.3.5?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>87</sup> Ishai Rosen-Zvi in *Demonic Desires* argues that Rabbinic thought about the *yetzer ha'ra* developed significantly from the tannaitic period through the amoraic period and that we have misunderstood it by not attending to the different historical layers in rabbinic literature (Chapter 1). He critiques the over-sexualization of the *yetzer* in recent scholarship, especially in the work of Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), and claims that this sexualized approach to the *yetzer* comes from the voice of the later stammitic layer in the Talmud (Chapter 6). Rosen-Zvi also pushes back against the overly-psychologized reading of the *yetzer* in contemporary approaches, seeking to correct some of these misunderstandings of the idea of *yetzer* in rabbinic thought with a demonological reading (Chapter 2 and 3). In Tannaitic thought there is only one *yetzer*. The notion of a *yetzer ha'tov* emerges first in the amoraic period. He says that in the tannaitic period, the school of R. Akiva understood the *yetzer* as an internalized selfish force that is opposed to the person and can be fought using Torah and the taking of oaths. It is a force that operates from within but is not identifiable with the person. It is also not opposed to some element of the person like the soul; it is opposed to the whole person. It is not the body, nor is it synonymous with the appetites, nor with desire, nor with reason. It is credited with making rational antinomian arguments, of being a force of selfish desire, as the character trait of anger, and as an internal urge to self-worship. Its defeat looks like excising it completely or enlisting it in divine service (Chapter 1).

Salanter inherited this rabbinic discourse but not with our contemporary historical lenses. It is therefore important to identify his understanding of the concept. Salanter inherited the idea of two

us is probably best translated as our selfish inclination.<sup>88</sup> The *yetzer ha'tov*, the good inclination, which according to some rabbinic sources shows up when we are old enough to start reasoning,<sup>89</sup> is tasked with subjugating this selfish drive, overpowering it and directing human action toward behaviors that align with our *telos*, with what is truly good for us. This battle is the source of internal division. The *shlemut* (wholeness) of *adam hashalem* is the overcoming of this division.

In "Letter Thirty" Salanter quotes *Bereshit Rabbah* 11:6 which says that all that God made during the six days of creation was created with some need for repair, some need of perfecting, even humans.<sup>90</sup> Our need for repair is thus something that God specifically intended for us. In fact, this was how everything was created. While God made everything good, God did not make everything perfect. All things have the potential to be perfected. Working within this framework for understanding the human condition,<sup>91</sup> Salanter offers

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*yetzers* and the two options of defeating the *yetzer ha'ra* or enlisting it in divine service. In contrast to the tannaitic approach, he connects the *yetzer* to a particular feature of the human person. For him, notably, the *yetzer ha'ra* and the *yetzer ha'tov* are both intellectual forces. Because he understands the *yetzer ha'ra* as a conscious intellectual force, he ends up creating a place for a pre-conscious selfish inclination that he calls *ta'avah*. For more on the role of *ta'avah*, see pages 184 and following below.

<sup>88</sup> If we use the word evil or bad to translate this phrase, there is potential for serious error. Evil or bad implies that this aspect of the self is always detrimental to our true good. But what we learn from rabbinic literature is that the *yetzer ha'ra* has an important, even essential, role to play in human life such that without it, humans would not build homes, get married, nor have children. All of these are elements of life that are also good. See Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 69a. The *yetzer ha'ra* is also called "very good" according to *Bereshit Rabbah* 9:7 on Gen. 1:31. For these reasons, I'm concerned that translating *yetzer ha'ra* as "evil inclination" will promote misunderstanding. Thus, I have chosen to refer to it as the selfish inclination. A certain amount of the concern for the self is important to human flourishing, but it is also easily a trap and a source of great evil in human action.

<sup>89</sup> Rabbinic sources indicate that the *yetzer ha'ra* appears in a person at birth. A few examples include *Bereshit Rabbah* 34:10 or B. Talmud *Sanhedrin* 91b. The *yetzer ha'ra* is also said to grow in strength over a lifetime. See B. Talmud *Sukkah* 52a. The *yetzer ha'tov* enters a person at the age of maturity, at thirteen for a man. See *Avot d'Rabbi Nachman* 16:2.

<sup>90</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 308. "Everything that came into being during the six days of Creation requires improvement – for example, the mustard seed needs to be sweetened, peas need sweetening, wheat needs grinding, even man needs repair." Translation mine. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.4?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>91</sup> In "Iggeret HaMusar," Salanter reflects on the qualities of the *yetzer ha'ra* and *yetzer ha'tov* as he inherited them. He notes that there are two schools of thought about the *yetzer*. One maintains that the *yetzer ha'ra* is the force of impurity and the *yetzer ha'tov* is the force of holiness. The other school

two potential paths for dealing with the resultant conflict in our inner lives. One leads to the indeed worthy and good way of walking with God attained by Noah and by Eliezer, the servant of Abraham. The second, however, leads to perfection, to *shlemut* (wholeness), to the spiritual stature of Abraham. Both are techniques for managing the challenges posed by the power of the *yetzer ha'ra*.

### 4.3 THE PATHS OF SUBJUGATION AND REPAIR

The first path, attained by Noah and by Eliezer is *kibbush ha-yetzer* (subjugation of the *yetzer-ha'ra*). Salanter says subjugation is a necessary skill, but it does not lead to *shlemut* (wholeness). Subjugation is the act of using one's good inclination to overpower the selfish one. This approach takes strength of mind and will, deep self-awareness, and regular self-examination.<sup>92</sup> What does this look like? Salanter encourages cultivating a habit of regularly bringing to mind the consequences of various actions. Before acting, consider how God would judge the act, then choose to act only in accordance with what is truly good.

סבת רפואתה לחלי הנפש, אם ישים האדם לבו ונפשו אל יראת התורה. אם בכלל, לידע ולהבין מהתורה, כי לכל עברה יש ענש עצום ונורא, ולכל מצוה יש שכר נעלה מאד. אם בפרט, והוא העקר, ללמד תורת כל עברה ועברה לבדה, לגאון תורת הגאון, למשא ומתן באמונה חלקי התורה אשר לענינים שבין אדם לחברו בעסקי העולם וכדומה, וכן לכל מצוה ולכל עברה את תורתה:

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says the *yetzer ha'ra* is the force of personal desire that is in conflict with the force of one's intellect. Salanter decides to maintain both approaches. The first helps explain why humans sometimes act contrary to their own desires, while the second explains how humans act wickedly in uniquely personal ways because we are not all equally drawn to the same vices. "Iggeret HaMusal," *Ohr Yisrael* trans. R. Zvi Miller (Southfield MI: Targum Press, 2004), 399-400. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Iggeret\\_HaMusal.15?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Iggeret_HaMusal.15?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>92</sup> This is a posture that Salanter encouraged heartily, regularly teaching in his sermons, according to his disciple R. Simcha Zissel Ziv, that if a person was living in the service of God with a carefree attitude, he was probably missing something. He wrote, "it is impossible that a person not daily encounter circumstances in which his desire and [the command] of the Torah conflict with one another..." R. Simcha Zissel of Kelm, *Sefer kokhvei 'or* (Jerusalem, 1974), 187, quoted in Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 232.

...the healing remedy for the sickness of the soul is for the human to bring to the attention of his heart and soul the fear [of God taught in] Torah. Whether in general: to know and understand from the Torah that for every transgression there is a mighty punishment, and for every *mitzvah* there is a reward of unimaginable elevation. Or in particular – and this is the prime factor – to study the laws of Torah that pertain to each transgression. For instance, and this is the heart of the matter, study Torah about each sin, each sin alone. For arrogance [one should study] the sections of the Torah about arrogance; for unethical business practices, the sections of the Torah that is relevant to the way to treat one's fellow in business affairs, and other things like that; for each *mitzvah* and each transgression there is Torah.<sup>93</sup>

When Salanter refers to Torah here he is indicating a wide collection of literature that includes Jewish law, halakha, and the study of musar, Jewish ethical literature. The prescription he offers is to study Torah, specifically the teachings on the punishments and rewards for specific actions. Implicit in this teaching is that desire for reward and desire to avoid punishment (fear) can interrupt powerful desires toward sinful activity.

Salanter particularly encourages spending time with musar literature, works that focus on the formation of the inner life and ethical character. These writings should teach people to develop sensitivity to the reality of their situation as human beings who too easily forget that they live in the presence of the Holy One. He encourages people to cultivate an awareness that they will one day be judged by the Almighty, writing in *Iggeret HaMusar*:

אם לא נשים לב לשׂדד אדמת לבנו בהרחבת רעיוני המוסר. אי לזאת גם הכח הפללי הלזה בל ישלח פארותיו על האברים לאסרם במאסר היראה.

We are devoid of the conscious awareness of the fear of judgement, unless we devote ourselves to till the soil of our hearts through the expansive thoughts of musar. Without making this effort, our general faith in the coming judgment does not send its tendrils over the bodily passions, to bind them with the constraints of fear.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Translation mine. Salanter, "Iggeret HaMusar," *Ohr Yisrael*, 402. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Iggeret\\_HaMusar.18?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Iggeret_HaMusar.18?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>94</sup> Translation from Salanter, "Iggeret HaMusar," *Ohr Yisrael*, 394. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Iggeret\\_HaMusar.7?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Iggeret_HaMusar.7?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

Internalizing a fear of judgement through musar study can also help people repent of sins to which they have grown accustomed. He continues:

וְזֶה כָּל עֲמַל הָאָדָם לְעִבּוּדָתוֹ יְתִבְרָךְ, לְחֹשֶׁב וּלְהִתְבּוֹנֵן בְּיִרְאַת ה' בְּפֶחַד עֲנָשׁוֹ עַל יְדֵי סִפְרֵי הַמוֹסֵר וְאַגְדוֹת הַחֲמִינוּז"ל, עַד אֲשֶׁר בְּאַזְנוֹ יִשְׁמַע כְּמַעַט בְּעֵינָיו יִרְאֶה הָעֲנָשׁ הַגָּדוֹל בְּכַמוֹת וְאַיִכוֹת נֹצֵב לְנֶגֶד עֵינָיו, ... וְאִם כֵּן יַעֲשֶׂה הָאָדָם וּלְבָבוֹ יִבִּין, וְשֵׁב וּרְפָא לוֹ:

This is the whole work in his service to the Blessed One – to contemplate the fear (*yirah*) of Heaven through the fear (*pachad*) of punishment. This is accomplished by means of musar books and the *aggadic* literature of our sages of blessed memory. To the extent that a person will hear with his ears and see, as if with his eyes, the quantity and quality of the great punishment. ... If he will do this and his heart will understand, and he will repent, and it will heal him.<sup>95</sup>

This first path of subjugation of the *yetzer ha'ra* rests on the study of both the halakhic and musar literature, and on internalizing the fear of divine wrath.<sup>96</sup> This is a path that uses the intellect, the imagination, and the emotional life to build up a rational aversion to sin. In

Letter Thirty, he writes:

וּכְשֶׁהָאָדָם בְּמַצֵּב כְּבִישֵׁת הַמִּדּוֹת וְתַאֲוֹת לַחֹת נִפְשׁוֹ עַל יְדֵי הַשִּׁקְל הַמְכַבֵּשׂ, נִקְרָא עוֹבֵד ה' בְּיָצָר טוֹב הוּא הַשִּׁקְל .

When a person is in the state of subjugating his character traits and the desires of his soul-forces through the overpowering force of intellect which is what subjugates them, he is called “one who serves *Hashem* (God) with his *yetzer ha'tov*,” i.e. with his intellect.<sup>97</sup>

It is rational to fear God's wrath. It is also rational to consider the long-term consequences of every action. Such a person is described as having a strong *yetzer ha'tov*, strong enough to

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<sup>95</sup> Translation adapted from Salanter, “Iggeret HaMusar,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 397. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Iggeret\\_HaMusar.12?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Iggeret_HaMusar.12?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>96</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 226, notes that, contra Etkes, the fear of Divine punishment does not become a major Salanterian method until the writings that we have from his days in Kovno, (1850-1858). This method does not appear in his writings from his Vilna days (1843-1849). Since my interest is in what can be learned from Salanter's thinking to construct a Jewish approach to ascetic formation, the historic development of his thought is not relevant.

<sup>97</sup> Salanter, “Letter Thirty,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 321. Translation mine. Hebrew text available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.20?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.20?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

subjugate the pull of the *yetzer ha'ra*. Salanter calls this kind of lifestyle “the service of God with the *yetzer ha'tov*” (with the good inclination).

Much of Salanter’s teaching efforts focused on motivating people toward this first step of cultivating *yirah*, the proper awe and fear of the Almighty. The meditation practices for cultivating fear focus on imagining the punishments for sins as a way of disrupting the sinful urges. He encouraged visualizations of personal physical danger, like of a sword poised between one’s legs, to help evoke a fear response that could override sinful desires.<sup>98</sup> This technique is analogous to the way that some people manage today to totally overhaul their diets out of fear of death after receiving a diagnosis like diabetes or heart disease. Fear is a powerful motivator. Subjugation of the *yetzer ha'ra* can be accomplished through cultivating a fear of what will happen when God metes out judgement. If people have the correct understanding of their situation they will know before whom they stand at every moment, before the Judge of all the earth. For Salanter, the appropriate response to that reality is to live with a healthy fear of God’s displeasure.<sup>99</sup>

Emphasis on fear of punishment is not popular and can sound foreign in contemporary Jewish theology, even if it has a long history within the tradition. Salanter’s emphasis on this technique is also part of why I think contemporary Jews express an aversion to Musar. But it is overly limited to think of the Musar movement only in these

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<sup>98</sup> Salanter, “Iggeret HaMusar,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 397, writes: “As our rabbis, of blessed memory, state (*Sanhedrin* 7a): “A judge should always picture a sword between his thighs and Gehinnom open beneath him.” If he will do this and his heart will understand – he will repent, and it will heal him.” Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Iggeret\\_HaMusar.12?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Iggeret_HaMusar.12?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>99</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 135, summarizes the idea of subjugation in this way: “Subjugation, said to be grounded in great psychic pain, requires overpowering positive motivation to be practiced successfully. Positive motivation for subjugation is provided by the good urge [*yetzer ha'tov*], which Rabbi Israel... identifies with *sekhel*. Here *sekhel* means the capacity to perceive the consequences of human behavior–Divine reckoning–and to act in light of the consequences rather than to indulge the immediate gratification promised by a prohibited deed. The good urge perceives the eternal punishment that an immediately gratifying sin entails. Subjugation, external restraint of sin, is service of God with the good urge.”

terms. Furthermore, cultivating fear of heaven as a path to self-control is not an innovation of Salanter. Salanter's theology of reward and punishment is rooted in a long tradition found in Deuteronomy and discussed in rabbinic tradition as *s'khar v'onesh* (reward and punishment).<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, this approach is also not his ideal. He believes that there is a higher version of human flourishing that can be attained. Subjugation is an essential skill,<sup>101</sup> but it is not the goal for a mature religious life.<sup>102</sup> It is not the main method for attaining the wholeness modeled by Abraham.

According to Salanter, the service of God with *shlemut*, wholeness, happens when the forces of the *yetzer ha'ra* are transformed, when the character traits of a person are repaired and not just controlled. He writes:

וְכֵשׁ הוּא בְּמַצֵּב תְּקוּן הַמְדוּת וְתַאֲוֹת כַּחוֹת נִפְשׁוֹ, עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִחַפְצוּ רַק אֶת אֲשֶׁר ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מֵאֲתָם,  
נִקְרָא עוֹבֵד ה' בְּיִצְרַר הָרַע... וְהָאָדָם תִּקְנֶם לְמַתַּק מְרִירוֹתָם לְהַפְכֶם לְטוֹב, זֶהוּ בְּשֵׁנֵי יִצְרֵיךְ בְּיִצְרַר טוֹב  
וּבְיִצְרַר רָע, בְּכַבִּישׁת הַמְדוּת וּבְתִקּוּן הַמְדוּת :

When [a person] is in the state of repairing his character traits and the desires of his soul-forces, to the point where he no longer wants to do anything except what God asks of him, he is called “one who serves God with his *yetzer ha'ra*” [selfish inclination].... The person repairs them [soul-forces], sweetening them from their bitterness to convert them to good. This then is the meaning of “[to serve Hashem] with both inclinations – the *yetzer ha'tov* and the *yetzer ha'ra*,” [using the *yetzer ha'tov* to] subdue [negative] character traits, and [using the *yetzer ha'ra* to] repair character.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>100</sup> For an overview of these ideas see: Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, Alvin J. Reines, and Richard L. Rubinstein, "Reward and Punishment," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik: 269-272. (Accessed February 4, 2020). [https://link-gale-com.proxy.bc.edu/apps/doc/CX2587516693/GVRL.encyj?u=mlln\\_m\\_bostcoll&sid=GVRL.encyj&xid=e785a052](https://link-gale-com.proxy.bc.edu/apps/doc/CX2587516693/GVRL.encyj?u=mlln_m_bostcoll&sid=GVRL.encyj&xid=e785a052). See also the commandment to fear God found in Deut. 10:12-13: “So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being” (NRSV 1989).

<sup>101</sup> Subjugation of desire may sound off-putting, but it is implied in the ideals of both consent culture and the #MeToo movement. Both contemporary movements assume that people are able, and should be expected to, control their natural sexual urges at certain times and in certain places. Both movements have clearly articulated goals but are still in the process of developing techniques for how to empower people to attain those goals. Salanter's thinking about ascetic formation might be something worth retrieving.

<sup>102</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 226, writes that Salanter put the highest value on the service of God that is motivated not from fear of punishment nor from hope for reward.

<sup>103</sup> Salanter, “Letter 30,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 321. Translation mine. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.20?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.20?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi)

Repaired character is the experience of all our internal forces being attracted to ethically righteous behavior, drawn to love and serve God. Salanter describes a person like this as serving God with his *yetzer ha'ra*, as opposed to allowing it to turn him away from God. He has repaired his character by creating a repair of his selfish inclination at a deep level. Wholeness has come about through the tuning of desires toward the ends set by the good inclination.<sup>104</sup> The natural urge toward sin and selfishness is displaced by a desire to do what is holy and good.<sup>105</sup>

Repair of the selfish inclination (*yetzer ha'ra*) requires working on a submerged and opaque aspect of the self. Salanter had a variety of ways of talking about this aspect of the self;<sup>106</sup> one word he uses of particular importance is *ta'avah*. This Hebrew word denotes a natural passion for pleasure. Salanter used it to describe the aspect of the self that determines most of our routine behaviors and spontaneous activities. For Salanter the

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[https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.54a.6?ven=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_English&vhe=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_Vocalized\\_Aramaic&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.54a.6?ven=William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&vhe=William_Davidson_Edition_-_Vocalized_Aramaic&lang=bi). Salanter is quoting B. Talmud *Brachot* 54a. Hebrew text available here:

<sup>104</sup> Salanter's contribution to this ideal of formation is not in describing what a good life looks like. He relies on the vision of the ideal Jew as a servant of God, performing mitzvot and demonstrating ideal character traits as described in classical Jewish works of ethical literature. What Salanter offers that is unique is a way of conceptualizing desire's role in relationship to the *yetzer* and a *method* for shaping the self through the cultivation of desire that leads to wholeness of heart. Jonathan Wyn Shofer, *The Making of A Sage*, 111, describes this ideal of wholeness in relationship to a story in *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* about Rabbi Akiva. He describes Akiva as "not obeying the law; rather, his fundamental desires are shaped through legal categories such that he experiences no temptation toward transgression.... This sage appears as a being entirely permeated by his traditional discourse. He has fully internalized Torah, such that even his most fundamental instincts are channeled through its categories..."

<sup>105</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 206.

<sup>106</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 106, says that Salanter uses a wide vocabulary for talking about inner psychic forces that push a person toward evil actions. He uses soul-forces (*kohot nafsho*) and lust (*ta'avah*) as well as words like inclination (*netiyah*), will (*ratzon*), sense (*hush*), delight (*hefetz*) and urge (*yetzer*). Most likely, Salanter uses so many different words because he was trying to talk about the pre-rational psychic element of humans for which there was not yet clear Hebrew vocabulary. Salanter also talks about non-psychic forces which can cause a person to act in evil ways. In his writings from his time in Kovno, he talks about the imagination (*dimyon*) as a source of evil as well as the *yetzer*, but in this case he seems to be referring to a non-psychic conscious aspect of the *yetzer*. In what follows I offer a fuller interpretation of Salanter's understanding of *yetzer* based on a synthetic reading of his entire corpus.

*yetzer ha'ra* and the *yetzer ha'tov* are both conscious intellectual forces.<sup>107</sup> The first is the voice that rationalizes selfishness and the violation of God's law, the second is the reasonable voice that reminds us of our duties to God and others. Studying Torah and especially halakha can help the *yetzer ha'tov* in its intellectual argument against the *yetzer ha'ra* and its rationalizations for selfish and even destructive behavior. Subjugation of the *yetzer* requires a strong will, strong intellectual powers, and self-awareness.<sup>108</sup> The strength to subjugate the *yetzer* is all work that is done through making conscious the internal struggle and through working to overcome the reasoning power of the *yetzer ha'ra*. This is important spiritual work, but it is not the same thing as *tikkun ha'yetzer*, the repair of the *yetzer ha'ra* (selfish inclination). That repair takes place preconsciously and its outcome is wholeness of heart in the service of God. To accomplish wholeness, there has to be some way for a person to bridge the gap between cognitive knowledge of the good, which the *yetzer ha'tov* already knows, and our preconsciously ardent desire (*ta'avah*).<sup>109</sup>

Salanter's answer to this challenge is to encourage a new kind of practice, a new way of engaging the Jewish textual tradition. In *Iggeret haMussar*, Salanter teaches that although every action, thought, and feeling makes an impression on *ta'avah*, some have more power

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<sup>107</sup> Salanter understands the *selfish inclination* as the intellectual manifestation of the confrontation between the *ta'avah*, the desire for short term self-gratification, and the normative demands of God's law. Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 98, summarizes Salanter's understanding of *yetzer ha'ra* as "the intellectual embodiment of *ta'avah* within the human consciousness." He goes on to say, "The great power of the *ta'avah* motivates people to seek intellectual justification for the satisfaction of their appetites, even when these are in opposition to the *halakha*.... It should not be surprising, therefore, that at times the Evil Impulse adopts a learned mask within the souls of Torah students and makes use of arguments that are based, upon *halakhah*."

<sup>108</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 146, points out that Salanter maintains that there is a role for the work of subjugation of the *yetzer ha'ra* at every point of people's lives, no matter how much they have actualized the wholeheartedness in service of God that his calls the ideal. Torah study has a role to play throughout a person's life, helping a person remain sensitive to their sin and giving them the strength to subjugate soul-forces that might come along and surprise us. See Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael*, 311.

<sup>109</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 100, writes, "This distinction – that is, between motivations for religious service operating on the conscious level and unconscious psychological motivations – is one of Salanter's major innovations."

to transform. Intense emotional feelings like longing make deep impressions. They accumulate through repetition; they amass onto a person's inner heart. Salanter likens it to water dripping onto stone for days and years on end. Eventually the stone is worn away – even though the first drop had no perceptible effect.<sup>110</sup> Salanter describes the effects this way: “So it is with “pouring” *Hazal's* [the early Rabbinic Sages] words upon a heart of stone: if a person delves intensively into them, they will eventually penetrate his heart.”<sup>111</sup> The impressions left by emotionally powerful study repair the *ta'avah*, shifting the natural orientation of desire away from selfish ends toward the ends set by God and learned from Torah. Salanter's idea shares elements with the ancient rabbinic practice of speaking verses of Torah as a way of rebuking the *yetzer ha'ra*.<sup>112</sup> When a sage was feeling tempted by a particular sin, he would quote passages from the Bible to rebuke his *yetzer ha'ra*. Salanter reconceptualized this practice to give a role to imagination and emotion.

Salanter in letter six calls these impressions “כחות הכהים לעזר נגד התאוה הפרושה” “dark forces” that aid in “the battle against rampant desire.”<sup>113</sup> I see two possible readings of Salanter's understanding of the repair of *ta'avah*. The first is that *ta'avah* is conquered or displaced by another positive force; something besides *ta'avah* overpowers it. This would be the noncognitive element of the *yetzer ha'tov*. The problem with this reading is twofold. First, Salanter never names any noncognitive element of the *yetzer ha'tov*. Secondly, it makes little sense to say that a person serves God with his *yetzer ha'ra* if instead the person has only conquered their *ta'avah*. Basically, this way of understanding Salanter reduces the

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<sup>110</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 207, speculates that Salanter got this idea of accumulated impressions from *Sefer Heshbon HaNefesh* by Rabbi Menahem Mendel Lefin. Goldberg disagrees. See note 3 above.

<sup>111</sup> Salanter, “Letter Thirty,” *Ohr Israel*, 335. Hebrew source available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.50?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.50?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>112</sup> Jonathan Wyn Schofer gives an account of this technique in *The Making of a Sage*, 97.

<sup>113</sup> Salanter, “Letter Six,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 181. Hebrew source available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.6.11?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.6.11?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

repair of *ta'avah* to another form of subjugation of the *yetzer ha'ra*. This first option negates the very distinction Salanter introduces between subjugation (*kibbush ha'yetzer*) and repair (*tikkun ha'yetzer*).<sup>114</sup>

I think it makes more sense to understand *ta'avah* as internal, deep, ardent desire that in its natural state is oriented toward selfishness like pleasure seeking. However, it can be transformed, repaired, and shifted away from selfishness and toward a longing for Godly purposes. When Salanter says that people of wholeness (*shlemut*) serve God with their *yetzer ha'ra*, he means that, at the deepest part of their *yetzer ha'ra*, their *ta'avah* has been reoriented by the desire for God and the love of doing what God loves. Their human nature has been transformed.<sup>115</sup>

This second understanding of *ta'avah* fits with the use of the word within biblical literature. תַּאֲוָה (*ta'avah*) appears in Gen. 3:6 where Eve sees that the tree is “good for food and desirable (תַּאֲוָה) to the eyes.” This usage places the word at the quintessential moment of disobedience. There, the eyes, i.e., Eve’s vision, are a trigger for *ta'avah*. *Ta'avah* is thus the kind of longing for something that is linked to the appetites, especially the longing for food. The Bible describes as *ta'avah* the mixed multitude’s lusting after meat when the people wandering in the desert were eating manna (Num. 11:14).<sup>116</sup> In 1 K. 11:37, this term describes the desire of the soul for power.<sup>117</sup> Ps. 10:3 refers to general desires as *ta'avah*, in this case, those of the wicked. In all these examples, *ta'avah* refers either to appetitive

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<sup>114</sup> In “Letter 30,” Salanter explains, “There are three levels of Divine service. The first one – the gateway and the beginning – is sensitivity. This is engendered by studying Chazal’s dictums and our Sage’s *Musar* teachings. A person must repeat them over and over until he is finally moved and senses a lacking in his soul. He then advances to the second level: the conquering of the evil inclination [*kibbush yetzer ha'ra*]. He then ascends to the third level: the repair of the evil inclination [*tikkun yetzer ha'ra*], so that he will rejoice and delight in his Divine service” (Translation from *Ohr Yisrael*, 345). Delighting in the service of God is what is practiced in meditating on *Musar* texts which describe ideal ways of living out the service of God. Delighting in the service of God is also the experience that results from the transformation of *ta'avah*.

<sup>115</sup> Etkes, R. *Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 206.

<sup>116</sup> Num. 11:4 והאספסוף אשר בקרבם התאוה ותאוה וישבו ויבזו גם בני ישראל ויאמרו מי יאכלנו בשׁר׃

<sup>117</sup> ואתג אקח ומלכת בכל אשר-תאוה נפשך והיית מלך עלי-ישראל׃

desires or to desires that are essentially self-centered or lead to wickedness. However, *ta'avah* also appears in a positive sense in Biblical literature, though much less often. Ps. 10:17 relates that God pays special attention to the desires of the humble/poor. Prov. 11:23 offers the best evidence that *ta'avah* includes good desires, teaching, “The desires (*ta'avah*) of the righteous are only good...”<sup>118</sup> In most biblical references to *ta'avah*, it either leads to bad outcomes or is neutral but self-centered. But there are a few cases where a person is said to have the kind of *ta'avah* that is precious to God, like the desire of the poor that is often something they cannot meet on their own, or the desires of the righteous which lead to good. Salanter is certainly employing the term differently than the Bible in using it to speak about an abstract part of the human person. Despite that, Salanter’s claim that *ta'avah* can be repaired and directed toward the good fits within the valence of the word in its biblical usage.

#### **4.3.1 The Path of Repairing One’s Character: Intro to the Technique of *Hitpa'alut***

Salanter’s understanding of repair opens up the possibility that a person’s *ta'avah* can be trained to long for God, to desire what God desires, thus gutting the antinomian voice of one’s motivation to make arguments for selfish or lazy behaviors. Salanter taught a meditation practice he called *hitpa'alut*,<sup>119</sup> a method of repetitive emotional engagement

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<sup>118</sup> תַּאֲוָה צְדִיקִים אֶרְ-טוֹב:

<sup>119</sup> Salanter uses this word to describe impassioned or enthusiastic speech or thought, most often directed toward *Musar* literature or other canonical texts. *Hitpa'alut* is a verbal noun form of the verb הִתְפַּעֵל meaning “to be excited.” According to the Academy of Hebrew Language historical dictionary *Ma'agarim*, *hitpa'alut* shows up first in written texts that date to the late eighteenth century. It was used occasionally, along with the more common term *hitlahavut*, by Hasidic masters to describe ecstasy in prayer. See Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, “Hasidic Sources in Heschel’s Conception of Prayer,” *Conservative Judaism* 50 (Spring 1998), 36-47.

with musar literature,<sup>120</sup> as a practice for repair of the *yetzer ha'ra*.<sup>121</sup> Rabbi Isaac Blazer, a student of R. Salanter describes the practice in this way:

... it is appropriate to repeat *Musar* sayings many times over. And specifically, when one comes across a saying of the sages or some other words of *Musar* by which he feels he would be affected and that would penetrate into the chambers of his heart, he should review and repeat it with deep affect many, many times...<sup>122</sup>

A literary description of the practice is also found in a Yiddish novel, *The Yeshiva*, by Chaim Grade (1910-1982), a former student in a *Musar* yeshiva. The book's main character is Tzemach Atlas, a young man who is drawn to study at the famous *Musar* yeshiva of Rav Yosef Horowitz in Novhardok.

Tzemach Atlas was a young Torah student in Lomzhe when he heard that in the *Musar* Yeshiva in Navhardok, the *yetzer ha-ra* – the temptation for evil in man – had already been slain... So Tzemach left his home town for Navhardok, where he struggled to perfect his character.... One day he lingered over his devotions for half an hour, shouting, swaying in all directions, and pounding his fists on the wall. The students assumed that the man was ... taking spiritual stock of himself... After such a lengthy swaying in prayer, and after pouring over a *Musar* book, Tzemach Atlas was hoarse and drenched with perspiration.<sup>123</sup>

Study of this kind invites a practitioner to be emotionally, imaginatively, and physically present as he meditates on a text. It is all these elements that made the technique a

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<sup>120</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 102. Most point to Bahya Ibn Pekuda's book *The Duties of the Heart* (c. 1080) as the first *Musar* text because it is the first systematic treatment of Jewish ethics. He wrote it at a time when systematic compendia of Jewish law, like the Rif, were becoming ascendant over the study of Talmud in Sephardic education. These legal texts extract Jewish legal thinking from their context within the Talmud, separating these legal discourses from ethical and narrative stories. The legal rulings were reorganized and compiled to be more easily referenced by legal scholars. Bahya was concerned that the cultivation of an inner life of devotion and ethical feeling was being neglected. He wrote ethical treatises on topics like trust in God, wholehearted devotion to God, the unity of God, humility, repentance, self-accounting, abstinence, and the love of God. These topics remain consistent in later *Musar* literature, while also expanded upon. He defined the purpose of his teaching as the creation of wholeness within the human person, the bringing together of the outer self and the inner self in wholehearted devotion. Bahya's wholeheartedness is focused on the unity of action and intention. Salanter's emphasis is on the unity between desire and intellect, though he certainly also teaches about the central importance of unified intention and action. See Bahya Ibn Pekuda, *Duties of the Heart*, trans. Daniel Haberman (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1996) 37.

<sup>121</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 207-208.

<sup>122</sup> Isaac Blazer, "Sha'arei Or," in *Or Yisrael*, ed. Isaac Blazer (Vilna, 1900) 33. Discussed by Moshe Gerstel, "The *Musar* Practices of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter," 224.

<sup>123</sup> Chaim Grade, *The Yeshiva*, trans. Curt Leviant (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 1.

powerful way to access *ta'avah*.<sup>124</sup> With both the repetitive and intense emotional quality of this kind of study, one might expect it to be done mostly in private, but this is not the case. Salanter encouraged people to “study” at least weekly in this style together in the *beit musar* (house of musar), a room set aside in the synagogue.<sup>125</sup> The communal element has a pedagogical role of modeling the practice. But, even more importantly, the intensity would grow for each individual through the power of the atmosphere created by sharing the activity.

Grade’s description in his novel of shouting, pounding, swaying and calling out while reading musar literature depicts a key aspect of *hitpa'alut*. It is meant to be a powerful emotional experience. Before Salanter’s spreading of Musar methods, Torah study focused on raising the consciousness of students, getting them to intellectually consider the principles that should guide their behavior.<sup>126</sup> Salanter’s innovation is the application of an emotionally focused mode to the study of Torah. Etkes describes *hitpa'alut* as “performed aloud, the power of the voice, the special melody, and the rhythm all serving to arouse the emotions.... [T]he melody [is] characterized by sadness and broken-heartedness, mingled with groans and at times even with outbursts of tears.”<sup>127</sup> He describes *hitpa'alut* as

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<sup>124</sup> For more on *hitpa'alut* and its impact on *ta'avah* see Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 311. Salanter describes it in this way, “...in most cases, a person does not have the strength to help resist his *ta'avah*, [requiring] a strong deep dark investigation.... Every emotional arousal (*hitpa'alut*) makes an impression on the *ta'avah*, no matter how dim. And when the many emotions from *hitpa'alut* are brought together as one, without great time gaps between them, *ta'avah* capable of producing potent results will be generated, just as any learned skill eventually takes root and becomes automatic.... The inculcation of *Musar* is based on the same process. If a person fervently devotes himself, each according to the condition of his 'disease' in relation to Divine service, to fervent *Musar* study... then *ta'avah* will be engendered to aid him in the battle against rampant desire.” Translation adapted from Salanter, “Letter 6,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 181. Hebrew text available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.6.10?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.6.10?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>125</sup> Salanter, “Letter 6,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 179-182.

<sup>126</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 102.

<sup>127</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 103.

different from intellectual study because it brought focused and intense attention to a particular aspect of one's character or of one's inner drives:

השכל, זה כחו ומעלתו להתפשט על כל גדותיו להתהלך ברחבה, לחפש ולבקר על כל צדי צדדים. לא כן ההתפעלות, זה דרכם לקנץ כל כחות נפשו, אל הדבר אשר עליו יורה זקי ההתפעלות, עד אשר כמעט כל יתר כחות נפשו שכוחים ונכבים לשעתו, לפי ערך חזק ההתפעלות :

The intellect, this is its power and virtue, to spread out on all banks [like a river], to expand wider as it moves, to explore and to search out all aspects of an issue. This is not the way with *hitpa'alut*; its way is to concentrate all of one's soul-forces on the particular thing the *hitpa'alut* comes to address, until almost all remaining soul-forces are momentarily forgotten and extinguished, in accordance with the strength of the *hitpa'alut*.<sup>128</sup> Salanter suggests that intellectual exploration does not engage the soul-forces. The intellect travels like a river seeking to flow to wherever it can easily move, shifting from topic to topic, looking at things from various angles. *Hitpa'alut*, by contrast, stays centrally focused on one issue and becomes so totally wrapped up intellectually and emotionally with it that all other drives are forgotten. The effectiveness of the practice is related to how powerfully one sinks into the state of mind and emotion cultivated by *hitpa'alut*.

Salanter's students left accounts of experiencing diverse feelings as a result of this practice. Some mention regret and broken-heartedness over sin, others feelings of purification, and still others feelings of awakening to a new longing for the good.<sup>129</sup> Goldberg describes the repair as involving feelings of "love, affection, delight, exultation, rejoicing, perfection, eagerness, joy, and, finally, sweetness."<sup>130</sup> We see a full scope of emotional energy in these descriptions, some that include sadness and regret leading to repentance and others that are more ecstatic.

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<sup>128</sup> Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael*, 332. Translation mine. Hebrew text available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.46?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.46?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>129</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 105. According to Yitzchak Blazer, *hitpa'alut* was said to transform a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. R. Yitzchak Blazer, "Ma'amar Sha'arei Ohr," *Ohr Yisrael*, 123.

<sup>130</sup> Goldberg, 144.

*Hitpa'alut* engages the imagination as well as the emotions. The practitioner intensively focuses on a single virtue in a text, imagining it as well as trying to feel its significance. Salanter taught, "The imagination is an overflowing river"<sup>131</sup> that can drown our intellect; it can be a source of help or harm in the project of ethical formation. The imagination can help us to fantasize about selfish and sinful behaviors, or it can be used to meditate on ideal character qualities. It can be invited to create new, counterbalancing traits to *ta'avah*. Through *hitpa'alut*, a person can be brought to a place where his very nature is transformed. According to Salanter,

... זה דרכה וחיילה [של ההתפעלות] להניח ברכה בקרב האדם, וגם אחר הסתלקותה, לא תעלה בתהו ותאבד, כי אם תשאיר אחריה איזה עוללות נספחים אל האדם. והיה ברבות עסק ההתפעלות, כן גם העוללות יתרבו ויתחזקו להפיק מזה האדם לטוב:

... *hitpa'alut's* way and power is to place a blessing inside of the person. And even after his departure from it, it does not turn into chaos, nor is it lost; rather there remains after it some gleanings appended to the person. And it will be that through extensive effort in *hitpa'alut* the gleanings will multiply and ever more strongly benefit the person's temperament.<sup>132</sup>

*Hitpa'alut* changes human nature, especially when practiced on a regular basis.<sup>133</sup> Salanter often encouraged people to study in this way several times a week. But he points out here that *hitpa'alut* is not something that is meant to only change feelings during participation; it fundamentally transforms a person. Even when one stops employing the exercise, it leaves fruit behind. The power of this meditative practice endures. Salanter says even just a few minutes of study a day in this manner can "yield abundant fruit."<sup>134</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Salanter, "Iggeret Ha'Musar," *Ohr Yisrael*, 392. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Iggeret\\_HaMusar.2?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Iggeret_HaMusar.2?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>132</sup> Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael*, 331. Translation mine. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.44?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.44?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>133</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 141, says that both habit and *hitpa'alut* are crucial to repairing the *yetzer ha'ra*, but *hitpa'alut* is the force that transmutes the *ta'avah*, and habit is only supplementary to this process. In contrast, subjugation of the *yetzer ha'ra* doesn't include *hitpa'alut*. Only habit is part of the method. I disagree with him on the notion that habit does not have an important role to play in bringing about the goals of *hitpa'alut*. Habitual practice of *hitpa'alut* is crucial to the goal of wholeness of heart.

<sup>134</sup> Salanter, "Letter 6," *Ohr Yisrael*, 182.

#### 4.4 EVALUATING THE ASCETIC PATHS OF REPAIR AND SUBJUGATION

*Hitpa'alut* is a powerful ascetic practice, but Salanter said it could not be depended upon completely to keep a person from sin. The willpower to subjugate desire is also critical. *Ta'avah* could surprise someone at any moment. What is the relationship between repair of the *yetzer* and subjugation of the *yetzer*? Etkes argues that because Salanter encourages the cultivation of both techniques, he does not attribute any value to the difference between repair (*tikkun*) and subjugation (*kibbush*).<sup>135</sup> He claims that Salanter has merely a functional preference for one over the other based on the circumstance. While I agree that both are important for Salanter, I think the logic of his teachings about wholeness of heart (*shlemut*) as the very purpose for which humans were created, sets *tikkun ha'yetzer* up as the most vital of the two.

Salanter does speak about the need to use both techniques. In “Letter Thirty” he explains how, having worked at repairing the *yetzer ha'ra*, a person should not let his guard down and think, “I no longer need to stay vigilant and self-reflective; I am capable of using my will power to subjugate my *yetzer ha'ra*.” Instead, Salanter argues that subjugation-level strength of will can be needed when one least expects it. He describes the challenge in this way:

במצב תקון היצר גם בחינת כבישת יצרו. בל ירפה ידו מהחזיק בה. כי אף שנעקר הרע מקרבו עוד מעין נרפש טמון בחבו להקיר מימיו. על ידי סבה גדולה המעוררתם להתגלות ממחבואם להתפשט לצאת החוצה להשחית. כמו האיש אשר הרגיל את עצמו במדת הסבלנות לבל יקצה מאומה על כל אשר נעשה נגד רצונו ותועלתו. בכל זאת איננו בטוח בדבר גדול אשר כנטל החול יכבד עליו לסבלו. אם לא יחתר בעמקי גדלת הענין להרום בנינו הטוב אשר קנה בעמלו ואז נצרך לגבורה יתרה לכבש תאותו אשר לא הספן בה. (כי כבר נעזב ונעקר מקרבו הרגל הכבישה במדה ...

In the process of repairing his *yetzer* (*tikkun ha'yetzer*), [he should maintain the ability] to conquer his *yetzer* (*kibbush ha'yetzer*). He should not stop his hand from subduing the *yetzer* [*ha'ra*], for even though he uprooted the evil that was within

<sup>135</sup> Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 296. Etkes compares Salanter's teachings to those of the sixteenth-century Lurianic Kabbalist, Rabbi Hayyim Vital. According to Etkes, Vital, in his musar treatise known as *Sha'arei Kedushah*, establishes a clear hierarchy, a preference for *tikkun* over *kibbush*.

him, there is still a dirty spring hidden within him waiting to issue its waters. By means of a single great stimulus, it is aroused, causing it to be revealed from its hiding place and to destroy. This is like a man who has habituated himself to patience, to not become furious about anything that might happen contrary to his will or his benefit. In spite of this, he is not certain that if a very great matter, weighing on him like a burden of wet sand were to arise, that he could bear it; except that he continually delves to the depths of patience to raise up his good character which he has acquired through great toil. Then he will require even greater strength, to conquer his *ta'avah*, of which he was not warned. (For the habit of overcoming his desire was already abandoned and uprooted from within him.)<sup>136</sup> Salanter explains that one ought to never presume that *ta'avah* has been totally purified.

*Ta'avah* is an unruly and unreliable aspect of the self. Repair practices sweeten the spring but that does not mean there will not still be moments when one must be ready to dam up the water that flows from it. There will still be times when one must be ready to resist the urges that can arise. The lifelong work of ethical self-education is never totally complete. Repair and subjugation of the *yetzer ha'ra* are both necessary techniques for living righteously.

Etkes is right to notice that Salanter does not suggest either mode can be abandoned. But never letting one's guard down does not mean that Salanter sees no hierarchy between *tikkun* and *kibbush*. His entire discourse about *shlemut*, wholeness, as the ideal way of living implies that *tikkun* is the ideal. In "Letter Thirty" he sets up a comparison between Abraham and his servant Eliezer. Salanter cites a teaching from *Bereshit Rabbah* 59:8 which says that Eliezer ruled over his *yetzer ha'ra* just as Abraham did. Salanter asks how this could be true? How could Eliezer have gotten to the same level of perfection as Abraham? We know that Abraham was given a special blessing to achieve wholeness; the Torah doesn't say that Eliezer was similarly blessed.<sup>137</sup> The midrash begins with the verse in Gen. 24:1, "And God blessed Abraham in/with all (*bakol*)" ....Rabbi Levi said, "in/with all"

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<sup>136</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 311. Translation mine. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.8?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.8?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>137</sup> Gen. 24:1 "And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things" (RSV).

means that God gave him mastery over his *yetzer ha'ra*.<sup>138</sup> Salanter's solution: Eliezer had mastery to the point that his character traits were subjugated (*kibbush*) to his *yetzer ha'tov*. But Abraham had been perfected to the point of actual *tikkun*, his inner life, his *ta'avah*, was repaired.<sup>139</sup> The superior attainment of Abraham, over that of his servant Eliezer, is found in his having repaired his *ta'avah*. This implies a strong hierarchy for Salanter in privileging *tikkun* over *kibbush*. The ideal is to attain wholeheartedness through *tikkun*, while at the same time never becoming incapable of *kibbush*. Salanter cautions his students to never assume they have arrived. He wants everyone to maintain a healthy skepticism of themselves.<sup>140</sup> No one should get so confident that they abandon self-examination or the inner strength to practice self-control.

Salanter's encouragement to take up an attitude of self-doubt and to focus on the need to fix the self speaks a language that can sound like a harsh way to treat the self. It can trigger negative emotions from people who struggle with shame. Salanter is clearly aware that every human being is complex, and he is careful to make space for the fact that we do not all start with the same innate abilities nor the same struggles, even if we all have the same calling.<sup>141</sup> Salanter regularly speaks about the ways in which we all have different

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<sup>138</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 59:7. Translation mine. Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit\\_Rabbah.59.7?vhe=Midrash\\_Rabbah\\_-\\_TE&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.59.7?vhe=Midrash_Rabbah_-_TE&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>139</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 325. Hebrew text available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.26?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.26?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>140</sup> This skeptical attitude toward one's own goodness helps to maintain humility and is deeply traditional. In the first rabbinic collection of ethical teachings, *Pirke Avot* 2:4, we find, "Doubt yourself until the day of your death." Hebrew text available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_Avot.2.4?ven=Mishnah\\_Yomit\\_by\\_Dr.\\_Joshua\\_Kulp&vhe=Torat\\_Emet\\_357&lang=bi&with=Translations&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.4?ven=Mishnah_Yomit_by_Dr._Joshua_Kulp&vhe=Torat_Emet_357&lang=bi&with=Translations&lang2=en).

<sup>141</sup> "We find that some individuals have an [inherently] good temperament and naturally pleasant character traits. On the other hand, other people are the opposite. Likewise, even concerning the particular person himself, sometimes his emotional tendencies are at odds with each other. Some of these proclivities proceed on an upright path (with no prompting or guidance), while others stray off on a crooked course." *Ohr Yisrael*, 307.

temperaments, different struggles, different areas of weakness or strength of character.<sup>142</sup> For some, attaining a particular character quality is easy; for others it takes intense work. The human condition is varied, thus even when applying maximum effort, the outcomes will be different. This does not change the goal, nor does it lead to utter condemnation of those who don't attain the goal. Modelling Abraham might be the goal, but Eliezer his servant also served God admirably.<sup>143</sup> There is no accounting for the Divine gift of character, guidance, or knowledge with which God blesses some and not others.<sup>144</sup> The important thing is to maximize one's efforts to improve from wherever one is graced to begin one's journey.<sup>145</sup>

Salanter is also attentive to the fact that people need help to apply his teachings in their lives. There needs to be a balance between self-examination and self-compassion. In "Letter Twenty," he writes to a Torah scholar who asked him for personal guidance. Salanter encourages the man to take different approaches to addressing aspects of his character. He describes the reality that while some virtues are easy to take up and assimilate, others are much harder. Salanter counsels a gentle approach to the difficult areas of growth.

ובדבר הקשה ההכרח להתגולל בנחת. ולהשיגו ברב זמן ועידן. עם התשוקה להשיגו במהרה. והן שני  
כחות מתנגדות. אשר צריך האדם לנגע בשניהם. כי אם יחדל התשוקה תתרפה המלאכה. ואם תחזק  
התשוקה ביותר אץ תשבת כמעט העבודה ולא תשא פרי חלילה. האדם הנלכב המשקיף על  
עצמו יבין בכלל איך לתוך ביניהם בלי גדר מגבל:

In difficult areas [of growth], the necessity is to rebuke oneself gently, and to achieve it over a long period of time, [but] with the yearning to achieve it quickly. These are two opposing forces, with both of which a person must be sure to engage. For if the yearning [to develop one's character] ceases, then the work will be listless. But, if the yearning is so strong as to be hurried, the work will nearly stop and will not bear fruit, God forbid. A good-hearted introspective person will understand in general

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<sup>142</sup> Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael*, 307. Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 146.

<sup>143</sup> Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael*, 323-325.

<sup>144</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 146-147.

<sup>145</sup> Goldberg explains the complexity of this idea in great depth, also focusing on the role of "Divine guidance and grace." For the purpose of this project, there is no need to dive deeply into the nuances of this particular topic. See Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 146-148.

how to mediate between these [two opposing forces] without a defined barrier between them.<sup>146</sup> Salanter speaks of the need for wisdom in order to chase the goal persistently while also accepting that the journey is long. Since this wisdom is hard to achieve, Salanter encouraged his disciples to “seek council and strategy on how to repair character traits and emotions”<sup>147</sup> from others. The journey to repair of character is not so easily applied to oneself. It is important to have others to talk with, to push when someone might be making excuses, but also to counsel patience and kindness when that is what is needed.

#### **4.4.1 Musar and the “Maximal Demand”**

One of the dangers of the focus on self-formation in the Musar movement is the potential that musar literature and musar practices could cultivate overwhelming amounts of shame, regret, self-condemnation, and self-loathing. These feelings are a potential part of any lifestyle, but the focus on cultivating ideal character and wholeness of heart can lead to people experiencing a lot of shame around “normal” life. Because of this danger, I conceived this project as a retrieval of ascetic practice with the help of the thinking of Charles Taylor and his standard, the “maximal demand.” The “maximal demand” is a way of talking about transcendent goals without “purging, or denigrating, ordinary fulfillments.”<sup>148</sup> The goal is to embrace our brokenness, our vulnerability, and our humanity, while practicing acts

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<sup>146</sup> Salanter, “Letter Twenty,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 247. Translation mine. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.20.2?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.20.2?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>147</sup> Salanter, “Letter Thirty,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 312. Salanter reiterates the need not to be over zealous nor too lazy in approaching the work of character transformation. He includes in this letter the encouragement to find someone who can act as a mentor. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.9?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.9?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>148</sup> Charles Taylor, *Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 640.

directed toward its perfection. The goal is to grow without despising our need for growth.

Modernity, in Taylor's words, brought us a

homecoming to the ordinary... the rediscovery and affirmation of important human goods. What is recovered in these moments of return is a sense of the value of unspectacular, flawed everyday love, between lovers, or friends, or parents and children, with its routines and labors, partings and ruinous, estrangements and returns.<sup>149</sup>

The "maximal demand" is a way of referring to transcendent goals that maintains the value of these good things. It must be truly aspirational and not merely the celebration of upper-middle-class social, cultural, and economic capacities. It is also a standard that looks for a vision of human flourishing that does not ignore or look away from the truly difficult and terrible aspects of human sensuality and aggression. The vision for human flourishing must offer real assistance to real people, to people plagued by harmful sensual longings or aggressive tendencies. If it misrepresents human nature, painting an overly rosy picture, Taylor describes it as guilty of bowdlerizing the human condition. Such a vision for human flourishing will fail. Does Salanter's *Musar* run afoul of Taylor's "maximal demand"?

There are ways in which Salanter's language participates in some amount of denigration of the physical. For example, he often uses discourse that links negative desire to physicality, to that aspect of the self that humans share with animals.<sup>150</sup> Salanter encourages people to be wary of certain kinds of physical and egotistical gratification. These longings are particularly easy to justify and a person can delude himself easily into thinking they are acceptable. Salanter refers to all people as having the same "disease of the soul – desire and misjudgment" which can lead us to declare pure our *ta'avah*, our cravings for impurity.<sup>151</sup> Acting on these lusts is dangerous because to do so intensifies *ta'avah* for them.

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<sup>149</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 628.

<sup>150</sup> Salanter, "Letter One," *Ohr Yisrael*, 143, writes, "It is normal for people to conduct themselves in these matters by following the dictates of desire – according to the whims of the will – like the behavior of an animal."

<sup>151</sup> Salanter, "Letter Four," *Ohr Yisrael*, 161.

Acting on selfish impulses can function like reverse *hitpa'alut* on our noncognitive *ta'avah*. Salanter offers the example of simple envy and pride, the desire to want to be better than one's peers as an expression of *ta'avah*. People cultivate *ta'avah* each time they chose to see their peers in a negative light, ignoring their own flaws while ignoring the virtue of others.<sup>152</sup> Receiving a lot of praise can also work like reverse *hitpa'alut*. Leaders and people in the spotlight are particularly susceptible to this kind of empowerment of the *yetzer ha'ra*. Rampant *ta'avah* can land people in cycles of self-deception and can even lead to losing a sense for what is good and right.

These are all indications that Salanter does not think of the human condition as one that is easily transformed, and to some degree, he blames human corruption on our physicality. But his relationship to embodiment is not so simple, making space for a recovery of his thinking in a way that can avoid denigrating embodiment. Salanter's understanding of desire as pre-cognitive does not demand that it be physical. In fact, *ta'avah* is an aspect of the self that is deeply connected with the intellect through its ability to influence the *yetzer*, the reasoning faculty. But even more importantly, I do not think Salanter violates Taylor's concern about the denigration of normal human achievements because his vision for a flourishing life is a life lived within the world of the mundane. The ideal is wholehearted loving service of God, a God who created the physical world for the flourishing of humans, as a gift. *Musar* does not prohibit any regular enjoyments any more than does Jewish law, which gives boundaries within which goods are meant to be enjoyed but does not prohibit them. Jewish life brings holiness to the mundane, not its abandonment. Salanter's *Musar* ideals about human flourishing are certainly not easily

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<sup>152</sup> Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael*, 332-333. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.47?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.47?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

accomplished, but neither are they an excessive demand which leads to despising the fragile and fallible reality of our this-worldly existence.

Hillel Goldberg summarizes Salanter's vision for the ideal as "a dialectical gesture" that "asserts, in theory and practice, the possibility of man liberating himself from the bondage of psychic and material need, not as a neo-platonic renunciation of the material world, but as a means of serving his fellow man in his very physiological and material need."<sup>153</sup> Perfection of character manifests in an ability to joyfully serve the material and psychic needs of others, while at the same time applying the virtue of abstinence to oneself.<sup>154</sup> This ideal, described above, suggests that there is no condemnation of these needs, since how could ideal behavior be to nurture others with something that is bad for them? *Musar* is a path to freedom from malignant soul-forces, not a wholesale denigration of materiality or basic bodily needs. The person who could practice this path to personal freedom, with the kind of true joy that Salanter says is possible, offers a profound testimony to a uniquely countercultural human flourishing. But just because this vision seems foreign to a society whose assumptions about human nature are formed by the culturally contingent ideals of personal "rights" and capitalist "self-interest" does not mean that it is a standard that has to lead to despising our own humanity or abandoning ordinary fulfillments.

#### **4.4.1.1 Evaluating Salanter's Fear-based Discourse**

Another objection to Salanter's approach could come from a concern about his readiness to use fear of God as a motivation to encourage self-control, *musar* study, and living the divine will. Motivating the subjugation of *ta'avah* along with its rational aspect,

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<sup>153</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 151.

<sup>154</sup> Salanter, "Letter Thirty," *Ohr Yisrael*, 317.

the *yetzer ha'ra*, takes a great deal of will power. Fear of divine punishment can certainly strengthen a person's will. But, Taylor points out, fear also triggers alarm bells. Critiques of religion by secular thinkers often say that "religion actuated by pride or fear sets impossibly high goals for humans, of asceticism, or mortification, or renunciation of ordinary human ends. It invites us to 'transcend humanity', and this cannot but end up mutilating us..."<sup>155</sup> Is Salanter's fear-based motivation dangerous in this way, does it necessarily lead to a retreat from the ordinary or denigration of physicality?

Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer, a student of Israel Salanter, introduces Salanter's collection of letters with an exposition on the role of "fear of God" in Musar. Blazer understands his own work to be in continuity with that of his teacher. Drawing on classical musar literature, he explains that *yir'ah*, the "fear of God" has two aspects: "dread of punishment" (*yir'at ha'onesh*) and "awe of the Divine majesty" (*yir'at ha'romemut*).<sup>156</sup> *Yir'at ha'onesh* is both a fear of direct punishment for sin, and a fear of the hurt that would come from losing out on being rewarded with the joy of being in God's presence. This implies that the longing to draw near to God by those who "fear" Him is strong. It is a fear that is based in longing. Blazer continues, writing that *yir'at ha'romemut*, "the awe of the Divine majesty" includes feelings of reverence and respect for the Creator's glory and majesty and the love of God. In this sense of "*yir'ah*," the respect and reverence for God motivates a person to avoid sinful behavior. But that is not all. *Yir'at ha'romemut* includes a second aspect: the love of God. And love of God, Blazer says, is the best motivation. Blazer cites the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 31a, that "One who serves the Almighty out of love is greater than one who serves Him out

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<sup>155</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 623. Please note, Taylor uses the word asceticism in this quote as a synonym for self-mutilation, the very thing that I am claiming does not have to be true of the ascetic enterprise.

<sup>156</sup> *Chovot HaLevavot*, "*Sha'ar Ahavat Hashem*," ch. 6, quoted in Blazer, "The Gates of Light," *Ohr Yisrael*, 63. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Shaarei\\_Ohr.1.6?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Shaarei_Ohr.1.6?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

of fear.” Blazer also uses classical musar literature for this argument, literature that Salanter read regularly and encouraged others to read.<sup>157</sup> Love may not be the starting motivation for most people, but it is the destination. Blazer says that fear of punishment might motivate someone to keep God’s commandments, but the fulfillment of Torah and the fulfillment of God’s commandments is accomplished by the person who has reverence and love for God.<sup>158</sup> Salanter’s championing of “fear of God” as a central motive needs to be read with this more complex understanding of its meaning.<sup>159</sup> If we do that, I think Salanter’s *Musar* teachings do not have to motivate the mutilation of self that Taylor describes, because the fear of God that he advocates is not the kind of fear that leads to taking drastic measures. That sort of fear, Hebrew renders more as *pachad* and not *yir’ah*.

The imaginative and emotional work of *hitpa’alut* includes but also transcends the register of fear. *Hitpa’alut* includes emotions like love and longing, joy and delight.<sup>160</sup> Repair of *ta’avah* directs attention away from controlling desire with the typical tool of self-restraint and, instead, invites people to spend time cultivating desire for the Good. Loving and longing for the Good isn’t focused on cultivating a feeling of deficit and lack, but rather

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<sup>157</sup> Blazer cites *Mesilat Yesharim* by R. Moshe Chaim Luzatto (Amsterdam, 1738), chapter 24. This text was widely used as part of the curriculum in *Musar* Yeshivas. Blazer also cites *Chovot Ha’Levavot* by Bahya Ibn Pequda (Zaragoza, Spain: 1080; trans. into Hebrew, Judah Saul ibn Tibbon, 1161-1180), chapter 6. Blazer, “The Gates of Light,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 63. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Shaarei\\_Ohr.1.6?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Shaarei_Ohr.1.6?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>158</sup> Blazer, “The Gates of Light,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 66. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Shaarei\\_Ohr.1.13?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Shaarei_Ohr.1.13?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>159</sup> R. Yitzchak Blazer also elaborates on the complex meanings in the command “the Lord, your God, you shall fear” from Deut. 6:13 in “The Gates of Light,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 67. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael%2C\\_Shaarei\\_Ohr.1.14?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael%2C_Shaarei_Ohr.1.14?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>160</sup> Moshe Gerstel, “Musar Practices,” 234, recounts a story from R. Naphtali Amsterdam who “asked R. Yisrael for a cure for anger. The latter told him to nurture goodness towards others, and that this attitude of lovingkindness combined with the good reputation one procures thereby will enable one not to get angry.” The focus of this teaching is on repairing the fault in character, namely anger, by focusing on cultivating its opposite, loving kindness.

about falling in love.<sup>161</sup> A person in love with the Good has a *ta'avah* that wants goodness. A person who meditates, with love, on descriptions of generosity acts with greater generosity. Salanter's *Musar* teachings offer insight into the malleability of human character. He articulates both a deeply rooted vision for ideal human flourishing as well as very practical advice for how to accomplish the ideal.

Salanter's conception of human nature and the ideal he set for human flourishing also avoids what Taylor calls the bowdlerizing critique.<sup>162</sup> Taylor says that we bowdlerize humanity when we either scale back our demands, making the ideal too easily attainable, or when we hide from ourselves the true darkness within the human condition. Salanter taught that every person has work to do. Many of us are in deep need of repair, but we are not in a hopeless condition. Goldberg calls Salanter a pessimist about the human condition, "but not an incorrigible one."<sup>163</sup> Salanter understood that humans were capable of great sin and evil, but he never lost sight of their great potential and calling. Salanter wrote eloquently about the profound problems of human nature and about our calling to emulate the ways of God.<sup>164</sup> In both cases he neither underestimated our depth of depravity nor did he set up an ideal that is too easily accomplished.

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<sup>161</sup> There is a way of meditating on the good, of cultivating devotional longing for an ideal that draws out of us a sense of our own inadequacy. We place before ourselves a model of Godliness, and thus what we see when we look at the self is how ungodly we each are. This kind of response can be good for some people. It can encourage a proper humility. It can help to push back against hubris, but it can also be psychologically harmful for sensitive people. People who are prone to self-criticism can experience *Musar* study as just another opportunity to hate their own brokenness. But I would argue that this is also a faulty way of participating in desire repair because it causes confusion about the correct object of thought. The ideal is the object of one's attention, not the self.

<sup>162</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 641.

<sup>163</sup> Goldberg, *Israel Salanter*, 205.

<sup>164</sup> See Letters Two through Four where Salanter writes about the many broken aspects of human nature, for example, our self-deception, our pursuit of honor, and our desire for what is illusory over what is of true worth. In Letter Six, Salanter speaks of Torah and fear of God as the remedy for our ills and speaks of our potential to walk in God's ways. *Ohr Yisrael*, 143-173

#### 4.5 CONCLUSION: THE IDEAL OF A JEWISH ASCETICISM

Salanter's teaching about wholeness and the path to its attainment should challenge our thinking about the purpose of religion. His presentation of the goals of life contrasts with modern conceptions of religion as primarily about ideas and beliefs. Salanter brings our attention to practice and the inner life, putting an ascetic ideal at the very center of Judaism. Salanter's teaching on *ta'avah* moved Jewish anthropological understanding towards a model that Judaism would come to share with the wider western world.<sup>165</sup>

While supporting a deeply traditional piety, at the same time Salanter upended his society's assumption about the qualities of the ideal Jew. In Salanter's Lithuanian Jewish world, communal esteem could be won through intellectual mastery of the Talmud and halakhic literature. This was a genre exclusively permitted to men. But women were not banned from studying musar literature. Salanter explicitly included women in the admonition to daily musar study.<sup>166</sup> We have no evidence that he actively recruited women to take up his Musar practices, but neither did he teach any kind of principled exclusion for them. He displaced the intellectual mastery of *talmud Torah* (torah study) with a vision of an affective elite that women could aspire to in his world but so could many who were not naturally gifted at the skills of intellectual life. In articulating an ascetic ideal, he reimagined which qualities mark out the religious person, opening an egalitarian possibility that did not exist before.

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<sup>165</sup> Bakan and Rabinowitz trace the similarities between Jewish thought and the Freudian psychological ideas which have shaped modern western anthropology. See David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1958) and Aaron Rabinowitz, *Judaism and Psychology: Meeting Points* (Northvale, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999).

<sup>166</sup> See Salanter, "Letter 5," *Ohr Yisrael*, 98, and Etkes, *R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement*, 109-110. The fact that Salanter saw *Musar* study as important also for women is noteworthy. Much of Jewish tradition neglects the topic of women's *yetzer* and how they might learn to manage it. See Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires*, Chapter 7.

Sarah Coakley and James K. A. Smith both talk about the central role of a telos in ascetic formation. I turned to Israel Salanter for a Jewish description of the telos of Jewish life. For Salanter the telos of Jewish life is wholeness of heart in the service of God. Wholeness is accomplished through tuning *ta'avah*. The experience of wholeness is of living with a vibrant love for God and delight in doing God's will.<sup>167</sup> Such a person finds joy in showering honor on others and cultivates an attitude of humility.<sup>168</sup> This way of being is marked by deep contentment. Salanter describes them as people who age with grace and exhibit a humility that is beyond our rational ability to understand.<sup>169</sup> This blessing from God comes as a gift to those who dedicate themselves to the path of desire formation through *hitpa'alut*.<sup>170</sup> And with this blessing there is no limit to the sanctification of one's character. A life lived in wholeness of heart blossoms with righteous fruit.

Wholeness of heart in the service of God: this is Salanter's vision of Jewish flourishing. That wholehearted service should be the end of a Jewish life well lived is not a new idea. King Solomon concluded his blessing of the people at the consecration of the Temple with these words, "May you be wholehearted with the Lord our God, to walk in all His ways and keep His commandments."<sup>171</sup> Salanter's description of the ideal mirrors these

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<sup>167</sup> Salanter, "Letter 30," *Ohr Israel*, 316. Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.12?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.12?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>168</sup> "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 326. Hebrew available here in Rav Israel Salanter's footnote:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.26?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.26?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>169</sup> "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 323, 325. Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.22?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.22?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en) and here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.25?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.25?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>170</sup> "Letter 30," *Ohr Yisrael*, 334. Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.49?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad,\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.49?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad,_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>171</sup> 1 K. 8:62 (NJPS), Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/I\\_Kings.8.61?ven=Tanakh:\\_The\\_Holy\\_Scriptures,\\_published\\_by\\_IPS&vhe=Miqra\\_according\\_to\\_the\\_Masorah&lang=bi&with=Commentary&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/I_Kings.8.61?ven=Tanakh:_The_Holy_Scriptures,_published_by_IPS&vhe=Miqra_according_to_the_Masorah&lang=bi&with=Commentary&lang2=en)

words. His contribution is his insight into the inner dynamics of desire formation and the way in which they help explain wholeness of heart. He describes the intellectual, emotional, habitual, and spiritual work that can free us from our double-hearted and cacophonous desires. The spiritual path he illuminates fits with Coakley's definition of asceticism. It is a path of *ta'avah* formation with a holistic vision of Jewish life lived in the presence of God.

What does it mean to take seriously that the purpose of life is divine service? Rabbi Salanter spoke to a community of people who understood in a deep way the greatness of this vision. Even if they were often just regular people, they participated in the ideational network that was the culture of traditional Judaism. But for people who do not share this language, it might be hard to understand the greatness of this ideal. One of the most eloquent Jewish thinkers on this topic in recent years is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Writing in a phenomenological style, R. Heschel described the world as seen through his own eyes, the eyes of a person formed by his European Hasidic family and the deep waters of pre-Shoah Jewish piety. He tried to teach that piety to an English-speaking world during the mid-twentieth century. His writing offers a response to modern critics of religion from the deep intuition of a traditional Jewish outlook.<sup>172</sup> For my purposes, he also describes the life of Jewish piety in terms of divine service, but in a theological register that can help the reader deepen their appreciation for the greatness of Rabbi Salanter's ideal.

In *God in Search of Man*, Heschel elaborates on what it means within a Jewish religious imagination to live a life in service to God. He describes it as much more than a path of obedient submission to God's will. This is a way of living together with God, of representing God, and of imaging God. Every action that fulfills a mitzvah is described by

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<sup>172</sup> For more on the role of traditional Jewish piety as the deep background of Heschel's work, see Joseph Harp Britton, *Abraham Heschel and the Phenomenon of Piety* (London: T&T Clark of Bloomsbury Publishers, 2013).

Heschel as an “act of communion with God.”<sup>173</sup> This is because it is an action that God and humans have in common, something they do together. An aspect of God, namely God’s will, is made to exist in our physical reality through the action of a human. It is fair to say that the human act and the will of God together make up the expression of a *mitzvah*. A life of wholehearted divine service will be a life of fellowship with God’s will.<sup>174</sup>

A wholehearted servant of God does not just live in fellowship with God, she also represents God in the way that she acts. Citing Gen. 18:19<sup>175</sup> which describes the reason that God chose Abraham, Heschel explains that “the Torah is primarily about divine ways rather than divine laws.”<sup>176</sup> By this he means that God does not just command what is in the Torah; God also acts as God commands. The spiritual intuition that Heschel describes here can be found in Exodus Rabbah 30:9: “The ways of God differ from those of man; whereas man directs others to do a thing whist he does nothing, God only tells Israel to do and to observe those things which He himself does.”<sup>177</sup> When people walk in God’s ways, they are doing what God does, not only what God wills. Since God also does what God commands, and it is by observing what God does that we come to know who God is, a person who is able to wholeheartedly fulfill the Torah can be said to represent God.

Wholehearted service of God is a way of more fully actualizing the potential to be an image bearer of God. What does this mean? According to the ten commandments, no image of God can be made. Heschel notes that while this is true, it is also true that God already made something in His own image, humans. The sacred calling of Jewish life is to respond to

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<sup>173</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 287.

<sup>174</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 287.

<sup>175</sup> “I have chosen him that he may charge his sons and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord...” Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 288.

<sup>176</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 288.

<sup>177</sup> Cited and translated by Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 292.

God's plea that we "do what God is."<sup>178</sup> This idea is illustrated in the Babylonian Talmud,

*Sotah* 14a.

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina asked, "What does Torah mean when it says, 'You shall walk after the Lord your God?' (Deut. 13:5). Is it possible for a human being to walk after the Shechina;<sup>179</sup> has it not been said: 'For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire' (Deut. 4:24)?" The meaning is to walk in the way of the Lord. As He clothed the naked so do you also clothe the naked, as He visited the sick, so do you also visit the sick, as he comforted mourners, so do you also comfort mourners...<sup>180</sup> Rabbi Hama is confused about how an embodied person is supposed to walk after God who is described as a consuming fire. The answer is that rather than physically following God, humans are called to model their actions after God. The Jewish people are meant to become what God showed Himself to be. They are supposed to do what God is. When the Jewish people wholeheartedly observe the Torah, what they are really doing is imitating God.<sup>181</sup> In imitating God, they are incarnating God's Torah and acting as a holy people. The wholehearted person does not seek to enter the sacred; rather he seeks to draw God down into the world, seeking to have the sacred enter into him. This is the grandeur of wholehearted service of God through *mitzvot*. The sacred will of God becomes incarnated in transformational human action.<sup>182</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel's descriptions of the ideal pious Jewish life surfaces the deep profundity of the ideal of *shlemut* taught by Salanter.

Israel Salanter's ideal is not merely about submission, nor is it only a way of holy behaviorism. With Heschel's assistance we can see that it is a way of talking about becoming a person who lives a life compatible with the divine presence. This is a deep vision of the Jewish telos that can serve as the goal of Jewish ascetic formation. And Salanter's

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<sup>178</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 290.

<sup>179</sup> Shechina is the divine presence of God manifest on earth.

<sup>180</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 288. Hebrew of Talmud passage available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.14a.3?ven=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_English&vhe=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_Vocalized\\_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.14a.3?ven=William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&vhe=William_Davidson_Edition_-_Vocalized_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>181</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 310.

<sup>182</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 311, says that these deeds do not just incarnate God, they also transform humanity, making them into a holy people, sanctifying them. At the same moment that humans seem to be transcending themselves most fully by doing what God is, they are also receiving a gift because God's purpose for giving the *mitzvot* is for the sake of human sanctification.

understanding of *yetzer* and *ta'avah* provides a way of talking in a Jewish register about the inner landscape of the human heart. Finally, Salanter's teaching of *ta'avah* formation through *hitpa'alut* offers one technique for desire formation that, as I will argue in the next chapter, can inform our understanding of how liturgical prayer functions as an ascetic practice.

## 5.0 A JEWISH LITURGICAL ASCETICISM OR ON THE LITURGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF A JEWISH ASCETIC SELF

“...[What is the meaning of] ‘and to serve Him with all your heart’ (Deut. 11:13)? This refers to prayer. As David said: ‘Let my prayer be like incense before You; the uplifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice’ (Ps. 141:2) .... Just as the work of the altar is called service, so too, prayer is called service.” (Sifre Deut. 41)

“Know the God of your fathers and serve Him with a whole heart (lev shalem) ... for the Lord searches/seeks every heart and every imagination of the yetzer...” (1 Chronicles 28:9)

In this chapter, I offer an exegetical reading of parts of the weekday morning liturgy as a demonstration of a Jewish liturgical asceticism. With Salanter’s help, and by drawing on the definition of liturgical asceticism articulated at the conclusion of chapter three, I treat *tefilat keva* (habitual and structured prayer practice)<sup>1</sup> as an ascetic act. I demonstrate that *tefilat keva* is a fully integrated intellectual, spiritual, and bodily practice that repairs *ta’avah* (*tikkun ha’yetzer*). I do this by analyzing central aspects of *tefilah* as they manifest elements of tacit desire formation explained by both James K. A. Smith and Israel Salanter. The analysis shows that *tefilat keva* is the kind of activity that forms tacit, pre-conscious desire, *ta’avah*, through the habitual, embodied, meaningful speech and action that implicates the person praying in an emotionally powerful narrative of ultimate concern. This narrative engages the imagination, emotion, and the body, shaping our social-imaginary.<sup>2</sup> Thus, *tefilat keva* can be described as a habitual ascetic activity, practiced over a

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<sup>1</sup> *Keva* has two senses. It is used to describe articulating words of prayer as rote recitation of fixed received texts, without intention. Prayer that includes intention is described as prayer with *kavanna*. But these same two words can be used to contrast prayer that is structured and habituated, routine, or regular with prayer that occurs spontaneously using personal words. When I write about *tefilat keva* I am using the word in this second sense. See Seth Kadish, *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Smith describes a “social-imaginary,” a term he borrowed from Charles Taylor, as “a noncognitive director of our actions and our entire comportment to the world.... [I]t is a way of intending the world – giving it significance – but in a way that is not cognitive or propositional.... Functioning on

lifetime, that is both sustained by and shapes a complete vision of the ends of Jewish life, expressed as *shlemut*, wholehearted service of God.<sup>3</sup>

In the last chapter I explained how Israel Salanter taught the repair of pre-conscious selfish desire (*ta'avah*), through emotionally charged, earnest, chant-like repetition of musar texts (*hitpa'alut*). His technique focused on placing before each person a vision of an ideal character trait and then encouraging people, through both instruction and modeling, to express in fervent chanting their longing to embody that ideal. By this method *ta'avah* (pre-cognitive desire) is retrained and becomes oriented toward the wholehearted love of God, leading to the experience of one's entire desire wrapped up in fulfilling God's purposes. Salanter's theory of *ta'avah* formation provides the rooted Jewish theological anthropology at use in this chapter, an articulation of the ends of life toward which desire formation is directed, and a theory about how textual encounter can impact the tacit formation of an ascetic self. In what follows I apply these ideas to the study of liturgy as an ascetic act.

James K. A. Smith, as I explained in chapter three, argues that liturgies shape the social-imaginary of people through habitual speech and embodied action that engages with a story of ultimate concern. Through regularly situating oneself within a great story, liturgy cultivates the imagination<sup>4</sup> and reframes how people envision the horizons of their

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the order of the imagination rather than the intellect, a social-imaginary is 'often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends.'" See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 25. Elsewhere Smith defines a social-imaginary, not as how we *think* about the world, but how we *imagine* the world before we ever think about it; hence the social-imaginary is made up of the stuff that funds the imagination—stories, myths, pictures, narratives. Furthermore, such stories are always already communal and traditioned. There are no private stories: every narrative draws upon tellings that have been handed down (*traditio*)... This shifting of our center of gravity from the cognitive to the affective—which is the whole point of describing this as an "imaginary" – finds its completion in the role of bodily practices in this picture." See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 66.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph is a further augmentation of Coakley's definition of asceticism that I discuss in chapter two and adjust to apply to the study of liturgical asceticism in chapter four. See pages 74 and 144 of this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 69, uses imagination to refer to multiple things. The imagination is the locus of a kind of embodied understanding, a know-how, formed through habitual practice. It is the

existence, with consequences for what a person ultimately aspires to and desires. The social-imaginary of a community is fostered by activities which engage these modes of formation. It is through forming their social-imaginary that people are implicitly enculturated to desire an implicit *telos*.<sup>5</sup> When a story of ultimate concern is coupled with kinesthetic habituation of our bodies<sup>6</sup> through the storage of thoughts and feelings within our body postures,<sup>7</sup> a social-imaginary becomes rooted in people physically and conceptually, forming a core way of being in the world that Smith, following Bourdieu, calls “background.” Smith argues that the “horizons” of this “background” can be expanded and even replaced by the “re-storying” happening as people participate regularly in Christian liturgical prayer. In what follows I demonstrate that this “re-storying” also takes place through *tefilat keva* because it also has these elements.

In this chapter, I weave together what I discovered in Salanter’s account of how to train *ta’avah* through *hitpa’alut* with Smith’s understanding of how “background” is liturgically constructed. I begin by showing that *tefila keva* implicates people in a story of ultimate concern through a close reading of the *aleinu* and *tahanun*. Together the two prayers communicate a sacred story by explaining how we came to where we are and where we are going. After demonstrating that *tefilat keva* frames our sense of sacred history, I turn to look closely at the *shema* and *amida*, examining them as articulations of our mission as we await the future and showing how they describe God’s vision for human

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domain of “tacit knowledge” that structures what we think is possible, what options we are able to even consider, as well as the cognitive doctrines or theories that we end up assenting to.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 66ff.

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty talks about our bodies as the “horizon” within which our consciousness operates. Bourdieu describes the ways in which our bodies are habituated through “postures, repeated words, and ritualized cadences” into a way of being that feels natural to us. In this way we become “natives” of the social world we inhabit. For more on this topic see chapter 3 pages 138-140.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 69, quoted by James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 94, teaches that the body is a “depository of deferred thoughts that can be triggered off at a distance in space and time by the simple effect of re-placing the body in an overall posture that recalls the associating thoughts and feelings...”

flourishing in this life. Finally, by looking closely at the daily prayers that appear surrounding the blessings of *birkhot ha'shaḥar*, I uncover two mini-patterns that continue to appear throughout the morning liturgy. These patterns, I argue, function similarly to *hitpa'alut*, engaging *ta'avah* by constructing over and over again emotionally powerful patterns that reframe all of life within a gift economy and evoke expresses of praise from the worshiper, stimulating desire. All these elements of *tefilat keva* together implicate the worshiper in an ascetic practice that empowers him or her to reach *shlemut*. As such, *tefilat keva*, ought to be understood as a powerful gift of God to help God's people attain a flourishing life. Approaching prayer as an ascetic activity opens up new dimensions of reflection on the kind of creatures we are, the goals of a flourishing Jewish life, and the importance of the practice of prayer for attaining the end of wholeheartedness.

One of the challenges of interpreting liturgy is the numerous meaningful associations available. There is uniqueness to each encounter with a liturgical text because of the associative aspect of human perception.<sup>8</sup> The culture of the individual worshipers, their own educational background, their notions or needs, etc., allow for the presence of many possible meanings. Liturgical texts often come from biblical and rabbinic sources such that they can trigger associations between their placement in the structure of the liturgy and their location within the corpus of Jewish literature.<sup>9</sup> It would be impossible to account for all the possible associations. To do so would be tantamount to mapping the cultural-linguistic system of Judaism.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the shared traditional liturgy also creates a

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<sup>8</sup> Heschel, in *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 78, diagnoses one of the problems with modern day prayer as that lack of capacity of modern readers to find insight into the words because they do not know how to link the words of the prayer book to the "lofty beings that populate the inner cosmos of the Jewish spirit."

<sup>9</sup> For a description of this method of liturgical analysis see Dr. Eli Kaunfer, "Interpreting Jewish Liturgy: The Literary-Intertextual Method," (PhD diss., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

boundary, a set of words that are present and therefore also a set of words that are not present. The understanding of the liturgy may be polyvalent, but it is not without some limits. Thus, from the outset it is important to recognize that what follows can only be one possible exegesis of the liturgy, never a definitive one.

Taylor's "maximal demand" and Coakley's model guide my approach. Taylor's "maximal demand" is a way of talking about transcendent goals without "purging, or denigrating, ordinary fulfillments."<sup>11</sup> It is also an articulation of a maximal vision of human flourishing that is for everyone, not just the people for whom being "well-behaved" is easy. To meet the "maximal demand" the vision of the good life must be a path available also to those who struggle with truly difficult and terrible aspects of human sensuality and aggression. Coakley's work remains a model for this chapter mostly through her definition of asceticism.<sup>12</sup> Because of their guidance I make sure to raise up elements of liturgical formation that counterbalance the tendency in ascetic discourse to denigrate physicality and worldly goods. I also bring attention to how *shlemut* is described in the liturgy as a goal for everyone no matter how disordered their desires. In what follows I make a point of emphasizing the forces within the liturgy that protect the practitioner of this ascetic exercise from violating the "maximal demand."

The analysis of liturgy that I offer in the rest of this chapter is focused on the Ashkenazi weekday Shacharit service.<sup>13</sup> Since habituation is a key component for forming

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, *Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 640.

<sup>12</sup> I would have liked to expand on this project by thinking about how my understanding of liturgical asceticism would interact with Jewish feminist critiques and how it might help Jewish communities concerned about contemporary social problems address the importance of desire formation. I am inspired by Coakley's work to think it this direction. However, taking my thought in those directions will require writing another book.

<sup>13</sup> The text I use in this chapter is *The Koren Siddur*, American Edition, trans. Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009). When referencing prayers, I will cite this edition and rely on the translation from Sacks unless I specify otherwise.

“background,” it makes sense to focus in this chapter on the weekday prayers because they are the most frequently repeated liturgical units.<sup>14</sup>

## 5.1 DEMONSTRATING THE ASCETIC POWER OF *TEFILAT KEVA*: A STORY OF ULTIMATE CONCERN

In Hayim Yerushalmi’s book *Zakhor*, he wrestles with the relationship between Jewish history as told by the scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and their descendants in the modern academy and between Jewish memory.<sup>15</sup> The Jewish people, he notes, are commanded to remember, and yet, this does not mean that they are meant to become a nation of historians.<sup>16</sup> Memory works differently than history; it has its own selective

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, for those Jews who only participate in synagogue prayer on the sabbaths and on holidays, the weekday liturgy will seem foreign to them. It would be interesting to consider how a person’s sense of purpose would be formed toward different goals because they only ever participated in festival liturgy.

<sup>15</sup> I find Yerushalmi’s thinking helpful because he points to the unsettling of a traditional imagination that takes place with the creation of modern historical research on Judaism. How Jewish groups choose to relate to history will have consequences for the future unity of the Jewish people. In the context of religious identity formation and education, the use of history can support, reframe, and augment the formation of sacred memory, but if it replaces the story of ultimate concern, it creates a new social-imaginary and in some real sense, a new identity distinct from what came before. We can see this demonstrated in the separation of Christian communities from Jewish ones in the early centuries of the common era. Christian memory is shaped by a story of creation, the revelation of the incarnate Jesus and his death and resurrection, and the hoped for coming of the kingdom of God. The destruction of the Temple for them indicated the world was in a new era and Age of Grace (*subgratia*). There are overlapping aspects of the Christian narrative with classical Jewish memory (creation and aspects of the future Kingdom) but how they each make sense of the world’s existential situation post destruction of the Temple is a central source of divergence. The Jews insisted the loss of the Temple sent the world into exile. It is those divergences which support core differences in their respective formation. If a Jewish group today were to fully replace classical Jewish memory with Jewish history, there is reason to think that will cause a significantly different and new expression of Jewishness that may lead in a number of generations to something as ‘other’ as Christianity is now. This is even more likely if at the same time the practices of the group change significantly. For an account of modern historiography as an expression of a secularized Christian approach to history and the tensions that should create with how Jews do history see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Jewish Memory between Exile and History,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 4 (2007): 530-543.

<sup>16</sup> Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1982), 10. I am indebted to Ruth Langer for this connection to Yerushalmi’s teaching on the memory pattern in Judaism.

criteria and it is conveyed through repetition and ritual. He notes that the Biblical criteria seems to be focused on remembering “God’s acts of intervention in history, and man’s responses to them be they positive or negative...”<sup>17</sup> It is God’s action that is centrally important to the biblical story, not the action of the Jewish people. The Hebrew Bible is not primarily a book about the Jewish people, it is a book about the God of Israel. We know this because of what the writers of the Hebrew Bible chose to remember and what they leave out. If it was a story primarily about the Jewish people, the book of Kings would read very differently.<sup>18</sup>

Yerushalmi points out that biblical memory played a key role for the talmudic rabbis, but not history.<sup>19</sup> They saw the Bible as “a revealed pattern for the whole of history.”<sup>20</sup> What is that pattern? It is a pattern of God’s redemption, human sin and rebellion, exile, human repentance, and God’s restoration/redemption.<sup>21</sup> God redeemed the Israelites from Egypt, gave them the gift of Torah, and promised the divine presence.<sup>22</sup> God called them to become a holy people in order to disclose God’s character to the world.<sup>23</sup> But when they entered the land, they forgot the Lord their God, something they were warned

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<sup>17</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Such a Biblical story would more likely highlight the successes of the Israelites, rather than focus on their failures, weaknesses, and their need to be rescued by God. See Judges and 1 and 2 Kings.

<sup>19</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 18, writes, “...the history of the Talmudic period itself cannot be elicited from its own vast literature. Historical events of the first order are either not recorded at all, or else they are mentioned in so legendary or fragmentary a way as often to preclude even an elementary retrieval of what occurred.”

<sup>20</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 21-24.

<sup>22</sup> See the book of Exodus

<sup>23</sup> God’s name and reputation is associated with the Jewish people’s success or failure in Ex. 32:11-12. The profaning of God’s name is linked to faithlessness in fulfilling God’s commandments in Lev. 22:31-33. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 24 summarizes the rabbinic sense of purpose for the time between destruction and redemption as the task of finally fully responding to the biblical challenge to become a holy people. Steven Kepnes, “Introduction,” in *The Future of Jewish Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 1-26, affirms the centrality of holiness to Judaism by calling for a revival of Jewish theology centered on the unique destiny of the Jewish people to be holy.

against in Deut. 6:10-12 and 11:13-21.<sup>24</sup> The Israelites failed through sin, especially the sin of idolatry. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed.<sup>25</sup> Many went into exile. The people repented of their sins and God forgave them, returned them to Jerusalem, and they rebuild the Temple.<sup>26</sup> Rather than treating this as one part of a much longer story, this specific story is treated as a sacred pattern, helping the rabbis understand their own situation.

This sacred memory, the story of God's free act to make a covenantal commitment, human failure and God's mercy and ultimate faithfulness to His covenantal promises is the story that completely absorbed the rabbinic imagination.<sup>27</sup> In their time, the Jewish people were again in exile, but this could not last forever. The God of Israel reigned, is reigning, and still reigns; saved, and will save again.<sup>28</sup> Yerushalmi's insights about the Bible and its role for the rabbinic sages elucidates a narrative pattern present also in the liturgy. This is the story of ultimate concern, the story disclosed by the Jewish liturgy, framing all of life within an extensive horizon, beyond the time of any one person, inviting each one to see their own life as part of the flow of this divine drama.<sup>29</sup> And it is crucial to note, this story is not taught in its entirety by the liturgy; it is presumed and gestured at. The presumption is that anyone

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<sup>24</sup> These verses are recited liturgically twice a day in the shema. Kimelman claims the shema is both an acceptance of God's kingship and a rejection of idolatry as well as an acceptance of the covenant. See his "The Theology of the Daily Liturgy," *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven Kepnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 84-85.

<sup>25</sup> 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Lamentations

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah and Ezekiel, Ezra and Nehemiah

<sup>27</sup> It created the framework for what is worth remembering and what is not. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 22, points out that there was no need, from their perspective to create a new framework for making sense of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE nor the expulsion of the Jews in 135 CE.

<sup>28</sup> *Koren* 70. God's salvific capacity and character is remembered repeatedly in the liturgy. Notably, services since the twelfth century have ended with a vision of redemption (*Koren*, 180). "Ultimately... every Jewish prayer ends with the *Aleynu* in which we turn to Him as the God of the future which will see mankind's redemption. Thus, prayer is a gate to our living past. As we probe its enduring meaning, it can become a source of power that points to the ultimate goal of man's existence." Ernst Simon, "On the Meaning of Prayer," *Understanding Jewish Prayer*, ed. Jacob Petuchowski, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1972), 111.

<sup>29</sup> Prayer's ascetic power is partly grounded in its role in overcoming forgetfulness of a meaningful past and orienting life toward an anticipated future. It creates a tradition-specific way of relating to time. For more on the relationship of asceticism, time, and memory of tradition see Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12.

who prays this liturgy will know the basics of this narrative. The liturgy discloses the story in a variety of places, but not in a linear fashion. *Tefilat keva* places the person praying into their role as someone already implicated by this story and creates a context for enacting their part in this drama.

### **5.1.1 Exile: How it Ends and How it Started and What that Tells us About our Purpose**

The story of ultimate concern I just described above situates our lives within the context of exile, we are between redemptions.<sup>30</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, at the end of his book *God in Search of Man*, describes our current reality as living between “Sinai and the Kingdom of God.”<sup>31</sup> What brought us to exile and how does it end? What is required of someone who lives between revelation and redemption? How does the liturgy both answer these questions and empower us to enact the answer? The narrative transmitted daily by the liturgy is one of life in need of redemption. Exile began because of misdirected desire expressed as sin. Exile ends with the destruction of idolatry, of all misdirected desire directed in an ultimate way toward what is not God.

*Tefilat keva* brings our attention to the story within which we are embedded, to what is needed to *faithfully await redemption* and to *be capable of inheriting it once it*

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<sup>30</sup> Exile is a state of dispersal of the Jews and the loss of sovereignty in the land of promise, but it is also a state of imperfection of the world more broadly. The first exile was experienced by Adam and Eve as a consequence of the sin in the Garden of Eden, the act of desiring and eating what God had prohibited. Within the context of the Covenant with Abraham and his descendants, exile is the time and place of national expiation. The Covenant is eternal, but the Land is conditional; exile is where we purify our hearts in preparation to re-enter the land. For an introduction to a concept that has been widely written on see Yitzhak F. Baer, *Galut* (German; Schocken Books, 1936) trans. R. Warshaw (English; New York: Schocken Books, 1947). For a more recent grappling with the topic see Yosef H. Yerushalmi, “Exile and Expulsion in Jewish History,” in *Crises and Creativity in the Sephardic World, 1391-1648*, ed. B. R. Gampel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3-22.

<sup>31</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 426.

*arrives*.<sup>32</sup> When God redeemed Israel the first time, the Israelites endured a forty-year journey through the wilderness before they were ready to enter the promised land.<sup>33</sup> The current exile is our wilderness. Our job is to use the time we have to purify our hearts in preparation for the future Kingdom when “the world will be perfected under God’s rule” and “when all humanity will call on Your name.... they will all accept the yoke of Your kingdom, and you will reign over them soon and forever.”<sup>34</sup> Two liturgical units that exemplify key elements of this theme in the weekday morning service are the concluding prayer, *aleinu*, and the supplicatory prayers of *taḥanun*.

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<sup>32</sup> *Sifre Devarim* 43 suggests that the purpose of doing the mitzvot in exile is so that when exile ends, the mitzvot will not be new, i.e. the people will be habituated to God’s commandments and thus will enter the land prepared. This idea is connected by the thirteenth-century commentator, Ramban (Moses Nachmanides) to Lev. 18:25 where we learn that the sins of the people defiled the land, which, in the end, vomited the people out. To be ready to enjoy the Kingdom of God that is coming, the Jewish people need to practice continually doing the will of God with a whole heart.

<sup>33</sup> The story of these wanderings is primarily found in Numbers.

<sup>34</sup> These phrases come from the final paragraph of the *aleinu*. See *Koren*, 180.

### 5.1.1.1 Wholehearted Joyful Service of the King:<sup>35</sup>Aleinu

According to aleinu, the concluding prayer of every service,<sup>36</sup> the future is a world in which the rightful King sits on the throne. The One who created this world will finally be honored by all its inhabitants as King.<sup>37</sup> This Kingdom vision is a description of redemption for the whole world, the end of the whole world's misdirected worship and service of that which is not God. "He is our God. There is no other.... We place our hope in You, Lord our God, that we may soon see the glory of Your Power... idols will be utterly destroyed, when

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<sup>35</sup> There is an ongoing concern in theology over traditional male God language reinforcing masculine hierarchies and excluding women and the feminine experience from association with God and thus humanities highest ideals. See Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), 121-169, and Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992) for strong arguments for including feminine metaphors for God. For an example in Jewish theology of the retrieval of feminine metaphors see Leore Sachs-Shmueli, "Shekhinah and the Revival of Feminine God Language," *Modern Judaism* 39:3 (2019), 347-369. While appreciating the concern and even resonating personally with it, I am also resistant to the substitutions of more abstract descriptive words like "sovereign" or "parent" when talking about God as a way of avoiding the implied masculine. These abstractions cause God to feel distant, undermining the very point of metaphorical language for God. People talked about God as Father and King because those were roles they related to in their world. Even today, they allow us to imagine God's relationship to us in concrete ways. In order not to undermine the value of the traditional metaphors for helping people draw closer to God, something particularly important in prayer, I will use the gendered word "King" throughout this chapter rather than "sovereign." But please note, I am not suggesting that God is masculine. Metaphors gesture at elements of God's character and relationship to humanity; they are applicable in some ways and not in others. No one metaphor can contain the whole. In the English-speaking world of the early twenty-first century, the most well-known sovereign is the Queen of England. There is no male king with a similar hold on our imagination in our time. It is because of this reality that I feel it is not a problem to use gendered monarchical language. In our contemporary world, Queens rule with the same authority as Kings. And by using the word King I use language that evokes biblical, midrashic, and Hasidic texts which all help describe who God as King is for us. See Elie Kaunfer, "Crowning 'the Un-king' King," in *All the World: Universalism, Particularism, and the High Holy Days*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014), 192-196, for an example of midrashic texts about God's kingship applied to liturgy.

<sup>36</sup> This prayer migrated from the Rosh Hashana liturgy to the conclusion of every prayer service around the twelfth century, probably in response to medieval Christian persecutions. For a study of its theological significance see Saul P. Wachs, "Aleinu: Rabbinic Theology in Biblical Language," *Conservative Judaism* 42, no. 1 (1989): 46-49. To understand why this prayer was added to the end of the liturgy, see Ruth Langer, "The Censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and Its Aftermath," in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer*, ed. Debra Reed Blank (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 147-166.

<sup>37</sup> The aleinu ends with these words: "then the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His name One." This is a quote from Zech. 14:9. This is the theme of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy in which it originated.

the world will be perfected under the sovereignty of the Almighty....”<sup>38</sup> What we worship, what we love, matters. The end of exile is described as a world without misdirected desire.

Abraham Joshua Heschel defines idolatry as making ultimate anything that is not God.<sup>39</sup> “What is an idol? A thing, a force, a person, a group, and institution or an ideal, regarded as supreme. God alone is supreme.”<sup>40</sup> The end of the exile and the coming of the Kingdom marks the end of, among other things, wrongly directed worship, wrongly directed desire. It marks the beginning of everyone’s “perfection under the sovereignty of the Almighty.”<sup>41</sup> The Jewish people’s role, in faithfulness to Sinai, is to be exemplars now for the truths contained in this anticipated future. What does it take to be perfected in this way? The aleinu says it takes embracing the calling to worship the King of kings. “It is our duty to praise the Master of all and ascribe greatness to the Author of creation.... Therefore we bow in worship and thank the supreme King of kings...”<sup>42</sup> At this moment the whole congregation bows, not just describing what they should do but physically inhabiting at that very moment a posture of worship, a posture of acceptance of God’s kingship. As each prayer service closes, the whole congregation physically bows. This physical action manifests the will to embrace the Jewish people’s unique calling to be the exemplars for the world. This prayer gives the people a mission, to live in such a way that they demonstrate

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<sup>38</sup> *Koren*, 180

<sup>39</sup> There is a much more limited vision of idolatry within Jewish thought that comes from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Avodah Zarah*, elaborated on in the halakhic tradition. This more limited view of idolatry centers around prohibiting idolatrous worship practices described as “foreign.” This shifts attention from exclusive focus on the object of worship to include the manner of worship.

There is also a medieval tradition that focuses on a philosophical understanding of idolatry concerned with the metaphysical conception of God held by Christians, Muslim, and others. This is a kind of understanding of idolatry as intellectual error. Heschel’s approach relies on a Biblical understanding of idolatry as fundamentally a betrayal of God and a source of immoral contagion. For an introduction to various traditions of Jewish thought about idolatry see, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 415. Heschel is particularly concerned in this passage with the sin that comes from making a religious group or idea supreme. Even religion cannot become an end in itself without corrupting its purpose.

<sup>41</sup> *Koren*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> *Koren*, 180.

what it is to “accept the yoke of [God’s] kingdom.”<sup>43</sup> Aleinu reveals what faithfulness to Sinai entails. To worship God alone implies no division of heart, no misdirected idolatrous desire. To accept God’s Kingship suggests the willingness to act in accordance with God’s will. Implied in these two concepts is the experience of unity of desire and will, a life of *sheleimut*, wholehearted service of God. This is what the end of exile looks like.

Aleinu’s role as a concluding prayer is to provide a summary statement of what life outside of prayer time is for.<sup>44</sup> It both describes the sacred Jewish story as far forward into the future as we are given to see, and it answers the question: what is the mission God is sending the Jewish people on? Our mission is to live toward the end of exile, toward a vision of wholehearted divine service. This makes how we go about living the commandments of God in the world of profound importance. Because of Sinai, the Jewish people know already what the future holds. We already know that flourishing is found through the proper orientation of our hearts in service of the Creator. Our job is to live as exemplars of God’s rule. The aleinu frames our actions as deeply significant to the accomplishment of the eschatological vision.<sup>45</sup>

Expectations like this could appear like a heavy burden. Does the job of representing God’s kingship imply a merely somber existence? No. True service of God, we are told in the opening portion of the morning prayer service, *psukei d’zimra*, is done in joy and happiness. “Shout joyously to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with joy.”<sup>46</sup> Again we see in the

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<sup>43</sup> Koren, 182. Kimelman, “The Theology of the Daily Liturgy,” 91, suggests that aleinu’s liturgical role is to describe the relationship of God with the community and all humanity. The individual is gathered, by this prayer, into the collective mission of the “we” who acknowledge God’s rule.

<sup>44</sup> True prayer has an impact on life outside of prayer. This is part of the claim of the dissertation: prayer is transformative. But the placement of the aleinu at the end of the service, along with its eschatological vision, implies that this prayer is even more directly about describing the ongoing purpose of the person praying when they leave the prayer space.

<sup>45</sup> *Kiddush hashem* (sanctification of the divine name) and *hillul hashem* (defamation of the divine name) are concepts that link Jewish behavior with Jewish witness to God. An act is a *kiddush hashem* if it causes others to revere God. A *hillul hashem* is an act that diminishes God’s honor. Biblical examples of *hillul hashem* can be found in Jer. 34:16 and Amos 2:7.

<sup>46</sup> Koren, 70. Ps. 100, from which this is a part, is found in its entirety in the weekday morning liturgy.

*ashrei*, recited twice daily, once at the beginning and once just before *aleinu*, “Happy are those who dwell in Your house... Happy are the people whose God is the Lord.”<sup>47</sup> Joy is not incidental to perfected life in God’s service; actually, it is essential. Joy is a hallmark of the kind of service God looks for. This teaching should imply that while we certainly understand ourselves collectively on a divine mission, our own happiness is not incidental to God.

Does loving God as our ultimate and highest affection require abandoning delight in all other goods? No. God gave us all the delights of this worldly existence as gifts, not as temptations. God wants us to enjoy our physicality, but to enjoy it in holy ways so that it leads to our flourishing and not to sickness and death. Consider the regular affirmation of creation as a gift from God found all over as we praise God as creator in the liturgy. This is found quite centrally in the first paragraph before the *shema* which I will describe in more detail below.<sup>48</sup> It is found in the description of material wellbeing as an expression of God’s blessing in the second paragraph of the *shema*.<sup>49</sup> The liturgy reaffirms regularly the material blessing and happiness that comes from a life as God’s servant. “Happy is the one who obeys Your commandments and takes to heart your teaching and Your word.”<sup>50</sup> Happiness and joy are to be the qualitative marks of a Jewish life and delighting in material prosperity as a gift of God is one of the many ways we can faithfully serve as exemplars.<sup>51</sup> Living with joy is essential to the mission we are implicated in by the story of God’s relationship with the Jewish people.

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<sup>47</sup> *Koren*, 72. These verses comes from Ps. 84:5 and Ps. 144:15 respectively. They form a liturgical preface for Ps. 145.

<sup>48</sup> *Koren*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> *Koren*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Koren*, 104. In the paragraph that begins *ezrat avoteinu*.

<sup>51</sup> See the ninth paragraph of the *amida*, *barech aleinu*. *Koren*, 119.

Embracing our exilic role includes both bowing our heads to the true King and serving with joy.<sup>52</sup> If we are experiencing a lack of joy in our service, this is crucial information that should spark reflection, repentance where necessary and even revision of our practice. Within communities of practice it is vitally important for people to have wise and trustworthy advisors who can help navigate the inevitable tensions that can arise through the application of this mission to one's individual life. Just as a person who wants to become a successful professional or sportsman can lose sight of other goods like family, community, personal satisfaction, and spiritual wellbeing in pursuit of their goal, the mission of the Jewish people to model the goodness of divine service can cause someone to lose sight of other goods. It is up to the community to model emotionally healthy expressions of God's service and provide contexts for honest council and reflection so that people who are veering toward more self-oppressive applications of these values can be guided differently. But explicit teaching and modeling is supported by the liturgical practice of morning prayer itself. *Tefilat keva* contains descriptions of life-affirming attitudes which color the sense of mission. Our tacit sense for what is worth doing with our lives, when formed by *tefilat keva*, is a vision of divine service with joy.

#### **5.1.1.2 Speaking of Vulnerability and Purification: Taḥanun**

*Tefila keva* includes a part of the morning service that grapples with the cause of exile. While *aleinu* and *ashrei* describe the end of exile and the best way to bring that about, through joyful modeling of faithfulness to God, *taḥanun* brings our attention to the causes

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<sup>52</sup> Hasidic thought on prayer offers a rich conversation about the importance of ecstatic feeling. It uses the term התלהבות *hitlahavut*, from the word for flame, to describe the Hasidic ideal of praying with boundless joy, delight, and burning enthusiasm. For an introduction to this idea see Louis Jacobs' discussion of "Ecstatic Prayer" in his *Hasidic Prayer* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 93-103.

and ongoing struggles of life in exile.<sup>53</sup> Taḥanun is a liturgical element that comes after the morning amida most weekdays.<sup>54</sup> The central theme of this collection of prayers is a plea for God's forgiveness and deliverance. The prayers are recited both standing, sitting, and with our heads on our hands, face down in a version of prostration. A fourteenth-century Spanish commentator on the liturgy, David Abudarham, says we take all these postures during prayer because we are mimicking Moses when he stood before God and argued God into being merciful.<sup>55</sup> Taḥanun reminds the Jewish people that exile came about because of sin, because of misdirected love.<sup>56</sup>

Linking the posture with this story evokes a sense of desperation and places us imaginatively a moment away from potential oblivion, just as the people who betrayed God with the golden calf were on the brink of destruction. But we also evoke the success of Moses at the moment, hoping that our prayers can be just as effective at eliciting God's mercy.

The Hebrew root of the word "taḥanun" is related to grace and mercy, תַּחֲנוּן. The taḥanun liturgy consists mostly of collections of verses from the Psalms and the prophets, but the largest section of biblical material comes from Daniel 9 where Daniel sits in

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<sup>53</sup> For a history of this complex of prayers, see Ruth Langer, "'We Do not Even Know What to Do!': A Foray into the Early History of Taḥanun," in *The Impact of Penitential Prayer Beyond Second Temple Judaism*, vol. 3 of *Seeking the Favor of God*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney A. Werline (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2008), 39-69.

<sup>54</sup> Taḥanun is not recited on days and even seasons of particular national or personal joy or sorrow. On Mondays and Thursdays, when Torah is read, the prayer is extended.

<sup>55</sup> Ex. 32:11-14. Ibn Ezra's commentary on Ex. 32:11 describes how the verse implies that Moses beseeched God with his face to the ground.

<sup>56</sup> My understanding of sin is actions that violate God's commandments. Classical rabbinic literature understands the first exile to Babylon to be the consequence of the worship of idols, sexual licentiousness, and murder and the second exile to be because of the sin of baseless hatred of the Jewish people for one another (*sinat ḥinam*). For a rabbinic account that points to these as the cause of the destruction of both Temples, see B. Talmud *Yoma* 9b. B. Talmud *Gittin* 55b-56a gives an example of the hatred expressed in the humiliation of Bar Kamtza by his host, leading him to cause the Romans to attack Jerusalem. A brief introduction to the destruction of the Temples in rabbinic memory can be found in Lawrence H. Schiffman, "Jerusalem: Twice Destroyed, Twice Rebuilt," *The Classical World* 97, no. 1 (2003):31-40, esp. pages 37-39.

sackcloth and ashes repenting of his sin and that of his people, devotedly appealing to God's mercy to forgive them for the sins that landed them in exile. He begs God to act out of compassion and save them. Central vocabulary are the words grace (*hanun*), compassion (*raham*), and loving-kindness (*hesed*). These are the words used to describe God, over and over and over again, especially in this liturgical element.<sup>57</sup> It has repeated pleas for forgiveness of sin, for safety and defense from the dangers faced by living in exile, descriptions of sadness and suffering, and a plea that God would not forget or cast away his people. This flow of words expresses a tone of sadness and desperation. It evokes feelings of deep need to have God step in once more and rescue Israel from its current exile. These words recognize that the joy of divine service is marked by vulnerability and tragedy, that we are often unable to save ourselves from the patterns of life that trap us, from the oppressive contexts in which we live.

Taḥanun makes space for owning our need within the relationship with God. We fail at joyful service. We fail to inhabit our calling. The failure can drive us away if we do not have a way to bring it into the relationship. The exilic consciousness creates a context in which lack of perfection in ourselves and in our experience can be made sense of within the narrative of God's goodness. God made a good world as a gift, gave us the Torah and a good mission for the sake of our flourishing, but the world is not as God would have it; we are in exile.

Taḥanun helps us give voice to the great tragic element at the heart of exilic existence. We are in need. We are vulnerable. The ascetic work of *tefilat keva* does not set us up with a pretend vision of the honest challenges to flourishing life. Both our own failure and the evil acts of violence and hatred toward us are part of a life in exile. R. Jonathan

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<sup>57</sup> These words appear as both descriptions of God and as appeals that God would act in these ways at least sixty times in the long form of taḥanun said on Mondays and Thursdays. See *Koren*, 144-156.

Sacks, in his commentary on the siddur, references the fact that words from taḥanun were found carved in the wall of a hidden room in the Nazi Theresienstadt concentration camp.

Heed our voice and be gracious, do not abandon us into the hand of our enemies to blot out our name. Remember what You promised our fathers: “I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven” – yet now we are only a few left from many. **Yet, despite all this, we have not forgotten Your name. Please do not forget us.**<sup>58</sup>

The specific phrase found on the wall is the last two sentences of this paragraph, in bold above, words that appear only in the liturgy. The etching evokes the whole passage with just this one line. In the concentration camp, God’s people were being blotted out. God’s promise to make them many in number was being actively eviscerated. This prayer met those people at that moment, helping them to express the desperation of their situation in words that endure, even if the person carving them into the wall would not survive.

There is a kind of dogged heroism in the refusal to abandon God described in this story. The suffering in Theresienstadt is linked by these words of taḥanun to the suffering of exile. Drawing on the liturgy, they found holy words for their vulnerability, anger, grief, and longing. They also found company; these words evoke the suffering of so many others at other times and other places who refused to abandon God. The use of this liturgical phrase in the life of the person who wrote it on the wall in Theresienstadt demonstrates a social-imaginary formed by the liturgy. To be formed by taḥanun is to be formed also by its grief. Taḥanun squarely faces a world filled with human evil, our own and that of others. It does not create a bowdlerized vision of human existence, a pretend idea of easy human perfectibility. An exilic experience includes being on the receiving end of abuse. Taḥanun makes space to bring feelings of helplessness, shame, anger, and need into the context of covenantal relationship, into our “horizon.”

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<sup>58</sup> *Koren*, 154.

To have one's social-imaginary formed by the exilic consciousness found in the liturgy will have consequences for how one makes sense of the current political realities of the Jewish people. These darker feelings of powerlessness characteristic of exile and evoked by taḥanun can seem foreign to contemporary Jews who often do not feel themselves in exile. The modern development of both a sovereign Jewish majority state and the fact that most Jews are afforded political citizenship in their countries of residence are evidence of a reduced experience of political exile in our own time. So what point is there to even saying taḥanun today?<sup>59</sup>

From the perspective of liturgical asceticism, the question is best answered by reflecting more broadly on what exile is. Is it merely the experience of political powerlessness? No. The pain of exile was never merely the loss of political agency. It included the loss of a special intimacy between God and the world made possible by the Temple.<sup>60</sup> Exile also brought a loss of God's more direct guidance of our political leaders. Also, the sufferings of life, the pain of oppression and the experience of being abused, our own human vulnerability, does not end with political agency. Power is still abused, and the innocent suffer. Taḥanun is a set of prayers that looks reality straight in the face. It stands in resistance to any kind of saccharine expectation that a life of divine service will be one of only ease, without challenge. The ascetic telos of wholeheartedness offers no promise of life without grief. Through taḥanun we bring to God all the pain of life and all our shame and ask for God to heal us and forgive us.

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<sup>59</sup> There is a point at which it would become impossible to continue to pray the liturgy in its current form with honesty. The liturgy we have now is unlikely to remain in this form in a context where the Kingdom of God is manifest in the earth. Liturgical formation will be impacted by people's messianic expectations. The liturgy also forms those expectations, but an ideological rejection of the coming of the kingdom or the restoration of the Temple by someone who prays these words could have a profound impact on the formative power of the traditional liturgy.

<sup>60</sup> On the centrality of Temple and its sacrifices in the liturgy, see Michael Swartz, "Liturgy, Poetry, and the Persistence of Sacrifice," in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History?: On Jews and Judaism before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple*, ed. Daniel Schwartz and Zeev Weiss (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 393-412.

Tahanun portrays exile as a place of suffering, a kind of suffering that we cannot stop. It suggests that we can use this type of suffering as a goad to introspection and as a purifying agent.

Remove from us the scourge of plague and the harsh decree, for You are the Guardian of Israel. You are right, my Lord, and we are shamefaced. How can we complain? What can we say? What can we plead? How can we justify ourselves? Let us search our ways and examine them and return to You, for Your right hand is outstretched to receive those who return. Please, Lord, please save.<sup>61</sup>

Suffering stimulates self-reflection, humility, and repentance. This is not a way of thinking that is well loved these days. It upsets the moral calculus of our power matrix, suggesting that the weaker suffering party maintains a moral burden, retains a scope of responsibility for their actions even while being harmed by others. It is also unpopular because it presents God as an agent in Jewish suffering, as if God either condones our suffering or refuses to end it. I do not deny that this matrix of ideas can be poorly applied.<sup>62</sup> But, there is something happening in this kind of reasoning, modeled on a logic found in the biblical prophets, that can be understood as empowering.

Suffering can be used to enhance our awareness of communal and personal sin, to encourage repentance and taking up new purified habits of life. To use suffering in this way steals agency back from disempowering and dehumanizing experiences. If suffering can be used to grow and improve, to become better, the experience can be overcome.<sup>63</sup> Writing to the Jews of North Africa in 1159, Rabbi Maimon ben Joseph, the father of the famous

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<sup>61</sup> *Koren*, 150.

<sup>62</sup> For example, the suggestion that God allowed the Jews of Europe to be murdered because of the sins of secularization and Reform Judaism removes responsibility from the Nazis for their crimes and blames the victim. Ascribing divine action as the reason for Jewish suffering in the twentieth century creates a horrific picture of God's character.

<sup>63</sup> Research into trauma and resilience suggests that events themselves are not traumatic. Trauma is a complex relationship between events and the coping strategies a person is able to employ. George Bonanno, *The End of Trauma: How the New Science of Resilience is Changing How we Think about PTSD* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), Chapter 5, argues that a "flexibility mindset" often leads to resilience. Such a mindset is optimistic, confident about an ability to cope with the event, and able to treat the event as a challenge to be overcome instead of a disaster that will defeat the victim.

medieval scholar Maimonides, offered comfort to the community living under intense Almohad persecutions. They were afraid that their suffering was evidence that God had abandoned the covenant, that there was no point to continue in their faithful commitment to God's service. Rabbi Maimon suggests another interpretation. Suffering is a sign that God is with you. Just as a father chastises his children out of love, desiring their good, so too God wants only to purify Israel.<sup>64</sup> Rabbi Maimon suggests that people can grab hold of suffering they cannot change and use it as a force for purification. It is not evidence of divine abandonment. This is a similar framing to how suffering is described as something we can use for our benefit by the liturgy of taḥanun. This approach to suffering that cannot be stopped by us directly still hands the suffering person agency through how they chose to respond to the suffering. If we use our sufferings to purify us, we do not have to become crushed under the weight of victimization.

Taḥanun shows how we can use our current exilic condition for our personal improvement. Exile is the place where we come to realize our sin and its gravity. It is the context for coming to know ourselves and our vulnerability, to realize our limitations and to turn our eyes to God. The final paragraph of taḥanun begins, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are turned to You." (2Chr 20:12)<sup>65</sup> In Numbers 15:38-41, a passage recited twice a day, morning and evening, as part of the shema, we hear "you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them and not follow the lust of your own heart nor your own eyes."<sup>66</sup> This verse is a counterpoint to the one in taḥanun; both teach that the way to

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<sup>64</sup> For a fuller summary of the letter of R. Maimon see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Maimonides*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Farrer, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 10. A translation into English with introduction can be found in L. M. Simmons and Maimun ben Joseph, "The Letter of Consolation of Maimun ben Joseph," ed. and trans. L. M. Simmons, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 2, no. 1 (1890): 62-101.

<sup>65</sup> *Koren*, 156.

<sup>66</sup> NRSV 15:39. The Hebrew word for desire in this verse is from the verb "זָנָה" which has a valence of sexual betrayal. One could translate the phrase as, "following your own harlotry." I am not using the Sacks translation in this case because it is overly euphemistic.

solve the problem of misdirected desire is to turn our eyes to God. When our eyes are led astray desiring other things in an ultimate sense, that is when our lives become distorted by idolatry. Exile does not just have to be a state of being tossed about as a victim of other people's agency. It can be used by us to repair our hearts in anticipation of a time of a restoration that will lead to our greater freedom, power, and responsibility. Exile is our training ground for redemption. Regularly praying taḥanun places purification of our hearts as a central purpose of exilic existence.

### **5.1.2 Faithfully Anticipating Redemption**

So far, I have explored the way that *tefilat keva* places us into the context of a story of ultimate concern, a story that centers us within exile but gives us a mission to live as faithful exemplars of the purpose of life taught to us at Sinai. Using some key examples from medieval additions to the fixed liturgy, I have suggested that the liturgy both communicates how we got to exile and how it will end, while also building a vision for purposeful action within the exilic context. The aleinu communicates, thrice daily, our mission to live as joyful witnesses to the goodness of God's service. Taḥanun exposes the relationship between sin, suffering, and exile. The failure of our witness is wrapped up with our ongoing struggle with sin, and the success of our mission is dependent on our repentance and on divine mercy, as well as on the purification of our hearts so that our desires do not constantly lead us astray. Taḥanun gives us words for expressing both our struggle and angst over sin and our vulnerability as well as the tragedy of existence in exile. And most importantly for this project, it recenters our eyes and thus our desires, on God.

My central claim in this dissertation is that Jewish liturgical practice, *tefilat keva*, is a desire-forming activity. By implicating us in a story of ultimate concern it tacitly

communicates a vision of flourishing Jewish life, a sense of purposefulness that transcends mundane goals even while not excluding their attainment. A person can serve God while getting a law degree or while delighting in touring the world. Delight in mundane goals or fleeting joys is not abandoned by the formation of a social-imaginary with a horizon that includes Sinai and the coming Kingdom of God. Instead, they are given their proper place, recognizing that they are neither the source of our ultimate satisfaction, nor the ends for which we live. Through *tefilat keva*, the praying person's imagination is brushed by a vision of their own purpose in bringing about the Kingdom. And in *taḥanun* we discover that the challenges we are facing in living our mission are not unique to us. Exile is a challenging place filled with suffering and tension, limits on our agency, and personal failures. The work of purification of our hearts is not accomplished quickly, but it is also not without hope. Turning our eyes, in prayer, to the One who called us to our purpose is one of the answers to our struggles.

In what follows, I exegete central liturgical sections of the morning prayer liturgy known as the *shema* and *amida*, the elements that form the historical heart of the service.<sup>67</sup> My focus is on what each communicates about the task of living well now, within exile. I further elaborate on the vision of a life well lived present in the liturgy, to show how *tefilat keva* forms our sense for what faithfulness to the Sinai revelation and the hoped-for Kingdom entails. *Aleinu* gives us a glimpse of the end of exile. *Taḥanun* gives a sense for the dangers that keep us from experiencing the flourishing that comes about through the end of exile. In what follows, I show how the act of saying *shema* affirms wholehearted love for God as the end toward which our lives are most properly directed. Salanter articulated this as the goal of human life, as we saw in the previous chapter. I show how that same ideal is

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<sup>67</sup> Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, tran. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 16. Originally published in German in 1913.

communicated tacitly and explicitly through both action and reflection, making shema an act that both communicates the goal and helps people to accomplish it. The repetitive act of uniting one's life to the ideal described in Shema acts tacitly on *ta'avah*, shaping our sense of mission and giving us tools to accomplish it. The shema describes the goal of rightly ordered loves, how to get there, and the dangers that can stop us from attaining the goal. The amida tacitly forms our *ta'avah* to desire what God wants for us. Through praying the amida we simultaneously enact the will of God as part of our collective calling to divine service, while the horizon of our consciousness is shaped by meditating on God's dreams.

### 5.1.2.1 Feeling and Deed: Shema Part 1

Liturgically part of both the evening and morning prayer service, the shema is a series of three biblical passages. It begins with Deut. 6:4, "Listen, Israel: the Lord (YHWH) is our God, the Lord (YHWH) is One,"<sup>68</sup> and continues with Deut. 6:5-9, Deut. 11:13-21, and Num. 15:37-41.<sup>69</sup> Together they form a unit famously referred to in rabbinic teaching as an act of commitment, "accepting the yoke of the kingdom of heaven."<sup>70</sup> The voicing of these pieces of Torah are named by this rabbinic interpretation as an act that puts us into a posture of accepting God's rule in our lives. The act of speaking these words is not prayer to God, but rather the giving over of our voice to the proclamation to ourselves of God's truth. The truth focuses on describing what makes for a life well lived. A life of wholehearted love

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<sup>68</sup> *Koren*, 98. This verse from Deut. is echoed by Zech. 14:9 that appears at the end of aleinu, examined above. "On that day the Lord shall be One and His name One." But Zech. implies God's oneness is not yet complete, suggesting that we have a role to play in bringing about this eventuality.

<sup>69</sup> *Koren*, 98-100.

<sup>70</sup> Mishnah *Brachot* 2:2. Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/245498.22?lang=en&p2=Mishnah\\_Berakhot.2.2&ven2=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_English&vhe2=Torat\\_Emet\\_357&lang2=en&w2=all&lang3=en](https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/245498.22?lang=en&p2=Mishnah_Berakhot.2.2&ven2=William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&vhe2=Torat_Emet_357&lang2=en&w2=all&lang3=en). See Kurt Hruby, "The Proclamation of the Unity of God as Actualization of the Kingdom," in *Standing Before God: Studies on Prayer in Scriptures and Tradition, with Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterreicher*, ed. Asher Finkel and Lawrence Frizzell, trans. Mrs. Claude Syler, (New York: Ktav, 1981), 183-93, for a theological analysis of the link between our accepting God's kingship in shema and the rabbinic vision for the coming of the eschatological kingdom.

for God is expressed affectively and in loyal deeds<sup>71</sup> and supported by rooting into our physical life reminders of the covenantal relationship established at Sinai.<sup>72</sup> The Shema links mind and body in a response to the story of ultimate concern that frames the purpose of Jewish life, to live a life in the shadow of Sinai.

The words of Deut. 6:4-9, in their biblical context, directly follow Deuteronomy's relating of the Sinai revelation. By setting these words at the heart of the daily prayer service, a relationship to the Sinai event is placed at the very center of life. The relationship described is one that demands wholehearted love. "You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart."<sup>73</sup> Wholehearted love for God is framed as the way to respond faithfully to one's mission. If we've already learned from *aleinu* the mission of joyful service, we find in *shema* a fuller understanding of how service and joy are woven together, it requires love.

There is a rationalist strain within Jewish thought that tries to eliminate feeling from its understanding of the *shema*. The argument goes, God cannot possibly command a feeling since feelings are not something we can control. It would thus be unreasonable of God to demand love. So love must mean acts of obedience and loyalty, nothing more. Jon Levenson, a Jewish biblical scholar, in his recent book *The Love of God* critiques this idea as having an unsophisticated understanding of the socially constructed aspect of emotions. He writes, "...emotion... can be generated, though not directly. It is generated through regular reflection on the story of the relationship of God and Israel... and continual recitation and ritualized remembering of the words of this revelation in the context of a social group

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<sup>71</sup> The love commanded here expresses more than mere affection. It describes a relational bond of loyalty, commitment, and unreserved willingness to act in God's service. For more on how to interpret love in the Hebrew Bible see William Moran, "Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1963); and Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992).

<sup>72</sup> Kurt Hruby, "The Proclamation of the Unity of God as Actualization of the Kingdom," 183-194, 184.

<sup>73</sup> Deut. 6:5.

explicitly committed to those activities.”<sup>74</sup> Interpretations that try to reduce love to mere action because of the idea that love can’t be commanded are missing something true about the formation of our loves. But Levenson also resists a reading of love as affective to the exclusion of deeds. “It is a love that becomes real and attains social force in acts of service and homage” (31). The love of God entails both deeds and emotions. Love for God is formed through regular, habitual, reflection on the story of God and Israel with others also committed to living a life in response to that relationship. In what follows I will look at two metaphors for this relationship that are implicitly evoked in the shema, one is based on a “suzerain treaty,” the other on God as a father.

The metaphor used to frame the words of shema impacts the formation of *ta'avah*. In the King/vassel model, the “suzerain treaty,” the act of saying shema is a loyalty oath. In it we declare our acceptance of our purpose to live as God’s loyal subjects.<sup>75</sup> In this model love is primarily felt as loyalty and expressed by keeping God’s commandments and walking in God’s ways.<sup>76</sup> This approach to shema is often emphasized in later Jewish tradition. For example, we see in the teaching of Moses ben Jacob of Coucy, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi in France, the following: “All the Torah is included in this [the commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength], because all his thoughts of one who loves the King are to do that which is good and the right in His eyes.”<sup>77</sup> The focus of this interpretation is entirely on the

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<sup>74</sup> Jon Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 32.

<sup>75</sup> The shema as an act of enthroning God as King is at the core of Kimelman’s interpretation of this passage. See “The Shema’ Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation.” *Kenishta* 1 (2001): 9-105. For an explanation of “the love of God” as a commandment framed in the context of suzerain treaties see Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985) and *The Love of God*, Chapter 1.

<sup>76</sup> Love and deed are linked in Deut. 6. William L. Norman summarizes the behavioral implications of the command to love God in this list: be loyal, walk in God’s ways, keep God’s commandments, and serve. See William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77-87.

<sup>77</sup> *Sefer Mitzvot haGadol*, Positive Commandment #3, Translation mine. Hebrew source available here:

doing of the King's will. The shema, as experienced under this metaphor, seems most interested in how we orient our outer life to the centrally important reality of God's role as our King. In affirming God as the highest authority in our lives, we push our *ta'avah* away from its self-centered tendency to enthrone our own will.

There is a formative power to reaffirming daily the authority of God over one's life, but this also creates a vision of conflict, of my will vs. God's will, and of submission as the central experience of religious life. Jon Levenson, citing the work of J.W. McKay, suggests an additional metaphor. The shema can also be understood in its biblical context as words spoken within a parental relationship.<sup>78</sup> How does this change the emotional tenor of Deut. 6? In the context of a parental relationship, it is utterly natural to experience feelings of love and to also do acts of care and loyalty that imply love. A person does not always feel enthusiastic when fulfilling these acts of love but nevertheless, the act of attending to duties of care, like diaper changing, cleaning, shopping, cooking, and feeding are performative expressions of love and lead to deeper love. Love expressed is a stable bedrock for relationship.

Instead of thinking of shema as our commitment to a distant, regal God, the parental metaphor frames shema as wise council offered by a father to a son.<sup>79</sup> "Hear O Israel... you shall love..."<sup>80</sup> are words of guidance to each of us, instructing us in the way that leads to our highest good. The rest of the passages following Deut. 6 that are part of the liturgical shema

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[https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer\\_Mitzvot\\_Gadol%2C\\_Positive\\_Commandments.3.1?lang=bi&with=all&ang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_Mitzvot_Gadol%2C_Positive_Commandments.3.1?lang=bi&with=all&ang2=en)

<sup>78</sup> Levenson, *Love of God*, 20. Also see J. W. McKay, "Man's Love for God in Deuteronomy and the Father/Teacher-Son/Pupil Relationship," *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972): 426-35.

<sup>79</sup> Note that this framing of Deut. 6:4 as an exchange between a parent and child appears in the opposite direction in Midrash *Sifre* Deut. 31:7. In that context the shema is placed in the mouth of Jacob's sons who use it to affirm to their father that they will maintain their commitment to his God. See Reuven Hammer, "A Legend Concerning the Origins of the Shema," *Judaism* 32, no. 1 (1983): 51-55.

<sup>80</sup> Deut. 6:4-5.

focus on describing performative acts of love, guiding us in what we speak about, how we use our time, and how what we wear can help us accomplish the goal of wholehearted love.

### 5.1.2.2 Through the Body to the Heart: Shema Part 2

The shema commands us to listen, but also to dress ourselves in a particular way. Framed as wisdom for our flourishing, the commandments to wear *tzitzit* and *tefillin* or to put *mezuzahs* on a house demonstrate God's deep understanding of our human condition and our need for physical reminders of our spiritual commitments.<sup>81</sup> Humans are not merely minds; we are bodies. Thus our formation must come through our bodies as well as our thoughts and our imagination. In the case of *tefillin*, they are worn, minimally, while speaking the words of shema in the morning. They contain the biblical passages which command their wearing on parchment inside leather boxes.<sup>82</sup> *Tefillin* take the idea of wholehearted loving faithful loyalty evoked in shema and inscribe it on the body, without tattoos. They are the technology that makes it possible to wear God's word. The straps of *tefillin* often leave marks on skin for over an hour after they are worn. For a person who has habitually worn *tefillin* as part of their daily prayer practice, the very feeling of the straps

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<sup>81</sup> The first and second paragraphs of the shema command speaking about the love of God at home and when one travels. They command wearing these words between one's eyes and near one's heart, understood as the wearing of *tefillin* (phylacteries), containers bound on one's forehead and arm that hold the written texts of these words. It also commands writing them on the doorposts of one's house, understood as placing a *mezuzah*, a container literally holding a text of these words on entrances to one's domain. The third paragraph focuses on wearing *tzitzit*, understood as knotted fringes tied on the corners of one's garments, as a representation of all 613 commandments. Tosefta *Berakhot* 6:31 records a saying of Rabbi Meir who describes each Jew as surrounded by mitzvot in the form of *tefillin*, *mezuzah*, and *tzitzit*.

<sup>82</sup> The verses are: Ex. 13:9 and 16; Deut. 6:8 and Deut. 11:18. The verses from Deut. are worn while they are being said liturgically. For an introduction to how the Sages came to understand these passages as a commandment to do Torah study, and thus not an obligation for women, see Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, "Women's Exemption from Shema and *Tefillin* and How These Rituals Came to Be Viewed as Torah Study," *JSJ* 42 (2011): 531-79. For a review of the textual sources proscribing *tefillin* for women because it is a male activity and discussing whether women might still take up the mitzvah, see Aliza Berger, "Wrapped Attention: May Women Wear 'Tefillin'?" *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, ed. Micah Halpern and Chana Safrai (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 1998), 75-118.

can evoke the feelings connected with the inner posture of love and loyalty cultivated by the act of saying shema.<sup>83</sup> While some people are known to wear *tefillin* for a significant part of the day, typically they are put on at the start of the morning prayer service and removed at its end. This embodied element of shema reinforces the Jewish embrace of the body as central to the self, dignifying it as a site of learning. Their presence throughout the service links the whole activity of prayer back to these specific words which communicate the most essential wisdom, to set the love of God at the very center of life.

Mara Benjamin in her recent book *The Obligated Self* celebrates the parental metaphor expressed in wearing *tefillin*. She connects *tefillin* to a Talmudic teaching about a son expressing his longing for his father. In the B. Talmud *Shabbat* 66b a son takes the strap from his shoe and ties it to his left hand to make physically manifest his desire to see his father again. Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak says, “This symbol is *tefillin*.” Benjamin sees *tefillin* understood here as a physical expression of our longing for closeness to God.<sup>84</sup> Putting on *tefillin* becomes an act of making physically manifest a feeling, a desire for God’s presence. Part of what we learned from Smith is that physical acts can form inner attitudes. *Tefillin*, when put on habitually, become another gateway to the formation of *ta’avah*.

Our longing for God is not the only feeling evoked by *tefillin*. There is a rabbinic interpretation that *tefillin* are a sign for us that God rescued us from Egypt.<sup>85</sup> Under this framing they take on a function, much like a wedding ring, of reminding the person wearing them of the love of their committed partner. God’s loving commitment to us is felt in the knots of *tefillin* on our skin. *Tefillin* can evoke emotions of longing for God directly, or they can stimulate love for God by reminding us of God’s love for us.

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<sup>83</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 69.

<sup>84</sup> Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), xxii.

<sup>85</sup> B. Talmud *Menachot* 36b.

Similarly, a *mezuzah* brings the words of Deut. 6 and 11, and the relationship with God they evoke, into our homes.<sup>86</sup> Maimonides describes the *mezuzah* as interrupting our reflections on vain vanities, acting like an angel to deliver a person from sin.<sup>87</sup> Maimonides sees the *mezuzah* as a desire-interrupting and-reorienting object. It is there to disturb our *yetzer ha'ra* and lead us back to reflecting on the paths of righteousness. The *mezuzah* is a tool for desire formation toward wholehearted love of God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" attends us as we move from room to room, enter and exit, structuring the relationship with God into our environment, and as a consequence, subtly acting to frame our vision of the highest ideal of life.

*Tefilat keva* brings our consciousness back to these metaphors and symbolic actions day after day. As we recite the shema while wearing *tefillin* often in rooms bearing *mezuzot*, we experience God calling us to wholehearted service and we literally feel on our skin the mutual loyalty of the relationship. The wholehearted service of God as an authentic ascetic end of a Jewish life well lived is not an externally imposed ideal. It is articulated, cultivated, embodied, imagined, and at the heart of the traditional liturgy. It centers our attention on loving God with our whole selves as the best way to live in light of Sinai and in hope of the Kingdom of God. To pray the shema habitually twice a day, as one does if one is committed to *tefilat keva*, is to practice describing and embodying the ideal of wholehearted divine service.

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<sup>86</sup> *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 286:4. Mezuzahs are meant to be placed on door frames of every room except the bathroom within thirty days of coming to live in a new home. B. Talmud *Shabbat* 66b. Hebrew and English available here: <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.66b.11?lang=bi&lookup=%D7%A1%D6%B4%D7%99%D7%9E%D6%B8%D7%A0%D6%B8%D7%99&with=Lexicon&lang2=en>.

<sup>87</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll* 6. Maimonides alludes to B. Talmud *Menachot* 43b with his reference to *mezuzah* functioning to prevent sin. Maimonides excoriates anyone who would treat it as an amulet. People who act in this way he describes as failing to fulfill the commandment. *Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll* 5.

### 5.1.2.3 Rightly Ordered Love: Shema Part 3

In addition to significantly repeating the contents of Deut. 6:4-9, the second passage of shema, from Deut. 11:13-21, describes the way that blessing flows to the whole people when our loves are rightly ordered. The text begins with encouragement to heed the commandments of God and to love God wholeheartedly. It then describes how a life with God as the ultimate object of love is one in which we experience flourishing and satisfaction. The blessings described are manifested in our collective human flourishing on the land which God gave to the whole people. This implies that my love for God and commitment to “heed God’s commandments”<sup>88</sup> creates goods for more than just myself. And also, in the next words, “be careful lest your heart be tempted, and you go astray after other gods,” we hear God warn us that satisfaction and blessing are also potentially dangerous as they can lead to our forgetting God. Our hearts are fickle.

The warnings of Deut. 11 expose the selfish and transient nature of untrained human desire. When we are in need, we turn to God for help. When we feel well and are attaining our goals, we easily forget God. To turn aside from the commandments is the path to misplaced love, to idolatry.<sup>89</sup> The warning is clear. In the best times, we can grow complacent; we need reminders to avoid straying.<sup>90</sup> The daily recitation of this warning as well as the physical presence of *tefillin* and *mezuzah* are wise practices for the ongoing subtle training of *ta’avah*.

The final paragraph, Num. 15:37-41, also has a profoundly physical expression and presents another action that can help to reorder our loves when our hearts are tempted to

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<sup>88</sup> Deut. 11:8

<sup>89</sup> See *Sifrei Devarim* 43:14 for a similar idea. Source available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Sifrei\\_Devarim.43.14?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Sifrei_Devarim.43.14?lang=bi).

<sup>90</sup> Lenn Goodman argues that this passage in Deut. 11 is not about God cursing or blessing us based on our behavior; instead it is, like I’m reading it here, a warning against complacency. See his “An Historic Misunderstanding of the ‘Keriyat Shema,’” *Conservative Judaism* 32, no. 3 (1997): 59-91.

go astray. The passage is about the commandment to wear fringes, *tzitzit*. The verses explain their role as a reminder of the commandments which we are told make us holy. The action can be fulfilled through wearing a four cornered prayer shawl with *tzitzit* during prayer, but it can also be fulfilled by wearing any four cornered garment with fringes throughout the day, most often under one's clothes. During the recitation of this passage in prayer, people hold the fringes and kiss them, pressing the *tzitzit* to their lips. Kissing, an expression of love, desire, care, and intimacy in other aspects of life is used here to stimulate those feelings for God's commandments.

The *tzitzit's* purpose, according to Num. 15, is to override the desire that comes from the eyes. The word for desire used here is זָנָה (*zanah*), a word that is linked to sexual sin.<sup>91</sup> The implication is that *tzitzit* can interrupt lustful desires. But the lust does not only apply to non-holy sexual urges. The original placement of this teaching in the Hebrew Bible is instructive. It follows directly on the punishment by stoning of the man who violated the sabbath by collecting wood.<sup>92</sup> The lusting that *tzitzit* can help us avoid seems like it could be broadly applied to anything that we look at and desire, a person or an object. In the case of the man who violated the sabbath, he looked, saw wood that he wanted and collected it, a concrete action of disloyalty to God by violating the Sabbath. There was nothing wrong with the wood, just with the man's failure to make God's will more important than his own immediate desire. Had he waited until the Sabbath was over, he could have gone out freely to gather the wood. Instead he gratified his desire immediately, regardless of God's instruction.

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<sup>91</sup> There is a story in *Sifre Nu. 115:2* of a man who was climbing up to the bed of a prostitute when his fringes smacked him in the face. They reminded him of his obligations to God and he abandoned his planned liaison. This story illustrates how wearing *tzitzit* and the repetition twice a day of Num. 15 in the context of the admonition to love God with all of one's being makes *tzitzit* into a powerful symbol that can restrain and retrain a person drawn astray by misdirected desire. The *tzitzit* are tools of ascetic formation. See [https://www.sefaria.org/Sifrei\\_Bamidbar.115.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Sifrei_Bamidbar.115.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>92</sup> Num. 15:32-36

Healthy asceticism does not lead to despising food, or sexual intimacy, or any other good we might desire. In *Leviticus Rabbah* 22:10 we find a teaching that begins “what I prohibited to you, I permitted to you.” The midrash continues with a list of things that God prohibits but that can still be enjoyed in another form or context, demonstrating that the forbidden is not to be despised, hated, or feared. The life of divine service leads to the fulfillment of many desires, even some we might have thought could never be fulfilled in a holy way. The ascetic life is not done properly if the renunciation of the thing leads to despising it.<sup>93</sup> It is the *tzitzit*’s physical presence that reminds the praying person of the calling to not be ruled by lusts, but instead to satisfy them through the ways in which Torah sanctifies their fulfillment, putting them in their proper place.

These verses of Num. 15 are a direct confrontation with appetitive desires, the desire to possess and the desire to attain sexual satisfaction, regardless of the righteous path to these goods. It is classically these desires that ascetic life is meant to control. We see right at the heart of this section of the morning prayer service a specific reminder of how to satisfy these desires. “Thus you will be reminded to keep all My commandments, and be holy to your God.”<sup>94</sup> The *tzitzit* remind us of the commandments which guide us in how to fulfill our desires in ways that lead to flourishing.<sup>95</sup> The act of reflecting on *tzitzit*, kissing them, and wearing them about one’s body all work together to subtly reorient *ta’avah* toward the love of God.

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<sup>93</sup> Central to my ascetic liturgical theology is the goal of articulating an asceticism that avoids the denigration of this worldly delights. See Chapter 2 pages 63-69.

<sup>94</sup> Num. 15:40, translation by Sacks, *Koren*, 100.

<sup>95</sup> In *Bereshit Rabbah* 34:10 we learn that the wicked are controlled by their heart whereas the righteous have control of their hearts. Examples of people controlled by their heart include Esau when he resented and plotted to kill his brother (Gen. 27:14), Jeroboam when he devised the scheme to keep the northern kingdom divided from the southern one by making a temple in Dan and one in Bethel (1 Kings 12), and Haman when he answered the King about how he should be honored (Est. 6:6).

The shema, I have argued, is an ascetic act directing our hearts by centering the wholehearted love of God as the ground and the goal of a life well lived. Deut. 6, presents wholehearted love as the goal that can be cultivated by speaking of God's teachings wherever you go, hanging God's word on the doorposts of your home, and wearing the word of God and a reminder of God's commandments. Grappling with the potentially conflictual model found in suggesting that God the King demands love of us, we found the metaphor of God's parental concern. God as Father opened up a space in which obedience, love, and loyalty make sense within our contemporary experience. God's nurturing role as wise and loving guide placed this whole complex of prayers within a relationship of mutual love expressed in feeling and deed. A twice daily encounter with shema in *tefilat keva* invites the whole self into an encounter with an ascetic vision that puts loving God at the start and end of a flourishing life. From the shema we come to understand the most important thing we can do, while we live in exile and prepare for the Kingdom, is train ourselves to love God wholeheartedly.

#### 5.1.2.4 Dreaming God's Dreams: The Amida

Our tour of what living in the time of exile asks of us continues with a look at the amida. The amida follows directly after the shema in both the morning and evening service and is the primary focus of the afternoon service.<sup>96</sup> The amida, called *tefillah* (prayer) in rabbinic literature, is the very heart of rabbinic prayer. It is made up of nineteen blessings. The first three and the last three appear in every recitation. The central thirteen appear

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<sup>96</sup> In his *Kuzari* completed in 1140 CE, Yehuda HaLevi constructs an analogy between the nourishment of the body by food and of the soul by prayer. "The blessing of one prayer lasts until the time of the next, just as the strength derived from the morning meal lasts until supper" (3.5). The analogy remains relevant in a society where we have the custom of eating three meals a day. Just as we feed our bodies thrice daily, so we should also feed our souls. Translation by Hartwig Hirschfeld, 1905 and found here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Kuzari.3.5?vhe=Sefer\\_haKuzari\\_-\\_Project\\_Ben-Yehuda&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Kuzari.3.5?vhe=Sefer_haKuzari_-_Project_Ben-Yehuda&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

during the weekday prayers but are replaced for holidays with a single blessing that focuses on the theme of the day.<sup>97</sup> Praise of God, petitions, and thanksgiving are themes that have often been used to describe the structure of this prayer.<sup>98</sup> Kimelman, offering a literary analysis of the central thirteen weekday blessings claims the prayer is a progressive realization of God's kingship.<sup>99</sup> From Kimelman's perspective, this prayer is "a post-Temple configuration of redemptive hopes."<sup>100</sup> I agree with Kimelman's reading in its broad sense, but the emphasis of my analysis is on the amida as formative of a social-imaginary and *ta'avah* rather than on intellectual acknowledgement of divine sovereignty. In what follows, I examine the amida as a prayer that discloses God's dreams, opening our imagination to God's cares and desires, expanding our sense for what is most worthy of our energy and time. Instead of approaching the prayer as a rabbinic description of redemption, I am treating the prayer as a window on God's redemptive hopes.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ruth Langer, "The Amidah as Formative Prayer," *Identität durch Gebet: zur gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens in Judentum und Christentum*, ed. Albert Gerhards, Andrea Doeker, and Peter Ebenbauer (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 128.

<sup>98</sup> These three elements applied to the amida are tannaitic or early amoraic in their source. See B. Talmud Berakhot 34a. Kimelman suggests R. Saadia's Siddur as a possible origin. They appear also in Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Love, Laws of Prayer 1.4. However, we should not be too wedded to this structure since the three elements are not so clearly reserved for the beginning middle and end but rather appear throughout the whole amida. Eliezer Berkovits tries to explain this interwoven quality in his article. "Prayer," in *Studies in Torah Judaism*, ed. Leon Stitskin (n.p., 1969), pp. 127f.

<sup>99</sup> Reuven Kimelman, "The Daily Amida and the Rhetoric of Redemption," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79, no. 2/3, (Oct. 1998 - Jan 1989): 165-179. The sovereignty of God is a theme Kimelman sees as central to both the amida and the shema. The liturgy certainly returns regularly to the kingship of God. Being a living example of what God's sovereignty makes possible is a central idea summarized in *kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of God's name. But as Ruth Langer has cautioned ("The Amidah as Formative Rabbinic Prayer," 143), there is a kind of flattening of the message of the text in Kimelman's reading. There is more to the amida than what Kimelman was able to uncover in his several essays on the topic. And the fact that he focuses on the same theme for his analysis of shema suggests that it is of particular importance to him.

<sup>100</sup> "The Theology of the Daily Liturgy," 89. See also: Reuven Kimelman, "The Literary Structure of the Amidah and the Rhetoric of Redemption," in *The Echoes of Many Texts: Reflection on Jewish and Christian Traditions, Essays in Honor of Lou H. Silberman*, ed. William G. Dever and J. Edward Wright, Brown Judaic Studies 313 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 171-218.

<sup>101</sup> Treating the prayer as an expression of God's vision for the end of exile makes the weekday amida only an exilic prayer, suggesting that it would serve little purpose in the Kingdom of God.

According to Jewish tradition, one of the primary purposes of human existence is to offer God worship. Genesis, and with it the entire Bible, opens with an account of God's creation of the universe in seven days. It is commonly accepted in biblical scholarship that, from the perspective of the ancient near east, this story should be understood as a poetic account of creation structured to communicate a central point: that the world is God's Temple.<sup>102</sup> Humans are placed as small icons of God within this Temple<sup>103</sup> and given the job (with their descendants) of acting as God's viceroy, collaborators in bringing about God's purposes for creation.<sup>104</sup> The dominion God grants to people is a responsibility to model God's vision of kingship, using power to secure the wellbeing of God's subjects.<sup>105</sup> Later in the biblical account, the Israelites are told by God, "if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples... you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."<sup>106</sup> This is spoken to the people just before the revelation at Sinai, suggesting that it summarizes God's purpose in choosing a people. In both the creation narrative and the revelation narrative, we find temple used as a central metaphor. God creates the whole world as a temple and chooses a people to be priests to

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<sup>102</sup> See biblical theologians Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 78-99; and Samuel Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 136-141.

<sup>103</sup> William P. Brown, "The Cosmic Temple: Cosmogony According to Genesis 1:1-2," in *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33- 79, 41-42, writes: "The cosmic temple code of Genesis 1 also reveals something significant about humanity's role and identity in the creation account. Many an ancient temple contained an image of its resident deity within its inner sanctum. In Jerusalem, however, the physical representation of God was expressly forbidden, at least by the time of the exile (sixth century BCE), as one finds, for example, conveyed in a certain commandment of the Decalogue: "You shall not make for yourself an idol." (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8).... Gen. 1, however, does not jettison the language of divine image but recasts it by identifying the *imago Dei* with human beings... While God lacks a blatantly anthropomorphic profile in Genesis 1.28 humanity is unequivocally "theomorphic" by design. Cast in God's image, women and men reflect and refract God's presence in the world."

<sup>104</sup> T. E. Fretheim, "Creator, Creature, and Co-Creation in Genesis 1-2," *Word and World*, Supplement Series 1 (1992): 11-20.

<sup>105</sup> J. Limburg, "The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1-11 and the Care of the Earth," *Word and World* 11 (1991):124-30; idem, "What Does It Mean to 'Have Dominion Over the Earth'?" *Dialogue* 10 (1971): 221-23.

<sup>106</sup> Ex. 19:5-6, NJPS translation..

serve in that temple.<sup>107</sup> Together these stories indicate that a central purpose for humans generally and Israel more particularly is to offer God worship.<sup>108</sup>

Rabbinic literature creates a direct link between the amida and the daily sacrifices of the Jerusalem Temple that can no longer be offered in the current situation of exile.<sup>109</sup> The morning and afternoon amida correspond to the *tamid* sacrifices offered daily on behalf of all the people.<sup>110</sup> The times for saying the amida correspond to these sacrifices.<sup>111</sup> The amida is recited facing Jerusalem and the former location of the Temple's Holy of Holies.<sup>112</sup> The priestly blessing recited in the Temple was inserted into the amida.<sup>113</sup> The amida, as a corollary to the sacrificial system, becomes the way that the whole nation fulfills its sacrificial responsibilities without a Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>114</sup> The amida is fundamentally a Temple activity.

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<sup>107</sup> The service of God is expressed through devotion and just living. Samuel Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 184, writes: "In the Deuteronomic charter the community of faith is summoned to twin commitments, each with its distinctive and unyielding claim on people: the commitment to love God absolutely; the commitment to live justly with one another. Towards such a goal the book of Deuteronomy provides for an Israelite 'polity' which, as S. D. McBride has suggested, is defined by a commitment to 'theocentric humanism.'" The focus of this project has been on the first commitment with the expectation that the formation of wholeheartedness makes a positive impact on ethical action.

<sup>108</sup> Samuel Balentine's extensive research into biblical forms of worship leads to similar conclusions about the centrality of worship to God's designs for humans. In *The Torah's Vision of Worship*, 115, he writes: "With the first act of worship (Noah, Gen. 8:20) and first words of worship (Abraham and Sarah, Gen. 15-17), the Torah begins to unfold its vision of the indispensability of worship for the realization of God's creational and covenantal designs for humankind."

<sup>109</sup> For a detailed exposition of the ways in which the rabbis "deliberately transferred Temple labels, rituals, and schedules" (13) to the amida, see Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), 5-14.

<sup>110</sup> *B. Berakhot* 26a, 26b. See also Langer, "The Amidah as Formative Rabbinic Prayer," 131.

<sup>111</sup> *B. Berakhot* 26a-27b; *P. Berakhot* 4:1, 7b; *Mishnah Berakhot* 4:1. See Langer, *To Worship God Properly*, 7, for instances and citations.

<sup>112</sup> Clearest discussion is *Tosefta Berakhot* 3:16. But see also *Mishnah Berakhot* 4:5-6; *B. Talmud Berakhot* 30a.

<sup>113</sup> *Mishnah Sotah* 7:6.

<sup>114</sup> *Mishnah Berakhot* 4:3 attributes to Rabban Gamliel the decree that all Jews are obligated to say this prayer every day.

That activity is not a solitary project. It is a way of being of a people. The amida is a collection of nineteen benedictions incumbent on individual Jews.<sup>115</sup> But the language of the prayer is plural: “Forgive us,” “look on our affliction.”<sup>116</sup> Ruth Langer describes the blessings as national in scope, placing the individual person praying within the national collective. Prayer in the plural decenters the I, placing me into a collective story that implicates me in the obligations of relationship to other humans and to God. It is a redrawing of the horizon of my imagination about who matters to me and for whom I am responsible. Rather than focusing on my sins and my needs, the amida leads us to pray that God would forgive our sins and would supply our needs. The divine service, the *avodah*<sup>117</sup> taking place in praying the amida, is a collective labor of a kingdom of priests fulfilling their calling.

Praying the amida, a Jew participates in the national project, the service of God. This service is not something one always feels like offering. The obligation to pray, an act that is supposed to be an “offering of the heart,” can feel like it is setting people up to do exactly what the prophet Isaiah condemned, “...these people ... honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me...”<sup>118</sup> It is precisely the way in which Jewish liturgical prayer is priestly in character that makes it *tefilat keva*. Because prayer is modeled on the temple service liturgical prayer life ends up struggling with the tensions named in Isaiah. But it is also this reality that sets up the possibility for *ta'avah* formation through *tefilat keva*. It is

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<sup>115</sup> Over the course of Jewish history, the obligation to say this prayer fell on men differently than it did on women. In our contemporary time we see some communities embracing a more egalitarian reading of the tradition and encouraging women to participate equally in this spiritual practice. For a textually rigorous defense of this move, see Ethan Tucker and Micha’el Rosenberg, *Gender Equality and Prayer in Jewish Law* (Brooklyn, NY: Ktav Publishing, 2017). I see no reason why the ascetic power of *tefilat keva* would function differently based on the gender of the person praying. I have taken for granted that all men or women who submit their lives to the rigors of this practice will find a similar kind of formation of their *ta'avah*.

<sup>116</sup> Both citations from *Koren*, 116.

<sup>117</sup> Literally, “work” but used to refer to the service of God in the Temple and by extension to “prayer.”

<sup>118</sup> Is. 29:13, Translation RSV 1989.

the regularity of prayer, the obligation to pray, the preservation of temple rhythms that makes it an ascetic practice.

How does thinking about *tefilat keva* within the context of Temple sacrifice change our understanding of the ascetic power in the prayer? *Tefilat keva* is an experience of learning to put God first, to pray for God's sake and not out of a felt sense of one's own need.<sup>119</sup> It is likely that the priests in the Temple offering the *tamid* daily sacrifice did not always feel thrilled to be doing their job. They made the sacrifices to God on behalf of the whole nation. *Tefilat keva* is similar to their offering, but in this case, it is an offering of time, voice, attention, care, all lifted up as a sweet aroma. To live in this way is to maintain a small ascetic practice, carving out time to allow God's dreams to inhabit our imagination. Understood in this way, the prayer becomes a context of sacrifice and a vehicle for drawing near to God. The word *korban* (sacrifice) means "to draw close." The amida is the prayer where we imagine entering and standing in the very presence of the King of Kings.<sup>120</sup> We draw near and whisper these words as our personal *tamid* offering in faith that God hears even the smallest voice.<sup>121</sup> As we do that the words caress our innermost being filling our imagination with God's concerns.

Understanding oneself as a priest offering a sacrifice is not the only way intimacy is evoked. When praying the amida, we take the posture of the angels, those perfect servants

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<sup>119</sup> According to the Hebrew Bible, God delights in sacrifice. Ps. 51:16-17 is often quoted to communicate the opposite, "You do not want me to bring sacrifices... True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit; God, you will not despise a contrite and crushed heart." It seems to contradict the many other verses describing sacrifices as "pleasing/satisfying aroma to God." See for example: Gen. 8:21; Ex. 29:18; Lev. 1:19; Num. 15:3. Rashi, an 11<sup>th</sup> century biblical commentator, explained the apparent contradiction. The author of Ps. 51 committed a willful sin. Willful sins cannot be covered by sacrifice, only by true repentance can a person make things right with God. Thus Ps. 51 is only speaking to a limited case, not describing God's general dislike of sacrifice. Translations from NJPS.

<sup>120</sup> At the start and end of the amida it is customary to take three steps representing entering and exiting God's presence.

<sup>121</sup> B. Talmud *Sotah* 32b says that the amida prayer must be enunciated with the lips and not just prayed in the heart. B Talmud *Berakhot* 31a quotes a *baraita* that says a person who raises their voice during the amida is someone of little faith.

of God who reside with God in the heavens.<sup>122</sup> Each metaphor evokes nearness to God.

When we stand to say the amida we are made aware of God present with us. We walk into God's presence taking three steps forward, we stand like the angels with our feet together, we whisper to our God who is close enough to hear us.<sup>123</sup> Each of these physical actions changes our perception, our horizon of plausibility, impacting our social-imaginary through our bodies. The presence of God is made palpable by these embodied actions, challenging a merely secular imagined reality.

The embodied elements of this prayer impress on us an image of God who desires relational intimacy. The amida is a tutor for understanding the covenantal relationship between Israel and God. It forms our imagination about who God is, the purpose of the relationship, and consequently, what is God's hope for us, what is a flourishing life. Through the amida we begin to see who God is and what God loves. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his phenomenology of Jewish prayer testifies, "To pray is to dream in league with God, to envision His holy visions."<sup>124</sup> When we pray the amida we see God and ourselves through God's holy vision.

The shema and amida together teach the Jewish people that we inhabit a love story, and thus it is a story in which who and what we love is crucially important. It is a story that begins in God's mercy and love and will end in peace. How do we get to its end point? The answer to that question is the answer also to how we live flourishing lives in exile. We have already learned from reading the shema about the beginning of this story: the mercy of God

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<sup>122</sup> B. Talmud *Berakhot* 10b.

<sup>123</sup> Ehrlich notes the standing posture is one that evokes both the service of God in the Temple, where standing was required in the divine presence, and the way that angels are described as standing and ministering around God's throne. To stand during the amida is to take on the role of God's priests and angels, both special servants. Uri Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer*, trans. Dena Ordan (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 27.

<sup>124</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susanna Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 353.

in creating and sustaining all and the love of God expressed in giving the gift of Torah. The weekday amida helps take our imagination the rest of the way. The exegesis of the amida that follows is not comprehensive. I offer some comment on the initial blessings but focus mostly on the blessings unique to the weekday amida.

The first blessing of the amida describes who God is. It begins with a reminder that God calls himself by the names of our ancestors: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. This short phrase echoes one of the ways that God refers to Himself when He spoke to Moses in the burning bush in Ex. 3:15. The blessing goes on to describe God as “the great, mighty, and awesome God” and then concludes by describing God as “shield to Abraham.” The passage evokes the greatness of God that could make God seem distant and inaccessible. It avoids this by weaving God’s loving commitment to Abraham and the other patriarchs together with God’s grandeur.<sup>125</sup> Our access to the mighty and awesome God is made possible because of God’s promises to Abraham. This first blessing grounds the beginning of the amida in a relational love story, one that began before us and will continue long after we are gone.<sup>126</sup>

The second and third blessings continue to elaborate on God’s qualities. God is described as mighty, a hero, a *gibor*.<sup>127</sup> God is also described as holy, *kadosh*. The power of God over death is the central example of God’s might. The holiness of God is not elaborated on but instead leads, in the *kedusha*, the elaboration of this third blessing in public prayer, to shouts of praise. The words of praise are linked to what Isaiah and Ezekiel each hear the

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<sup>125</sup> In the contemporary world, liberal communities have challenged the exclusively patriarchal references in this passage. For a study of the various ways in which liberal communities have added references to the matriarchs see Sara Smith, “The Imahot in the Amida: A History,” *Contemporary Jewry* 32, no. 3 (October 2012): 309-27.

<sup>126</sup> In *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 279, Michael Wyschogrod uses a biological metaphor to explain chosenness. The Jewish people are akin to cells in the body of Abraham, participating in the love of God for Abraham, extending it spatially and temporally.

<sup>127</sup> For a consideration of the biblical presentation of God as a hero see Elliot Rabin, *The Biblical Hero: Portraits in Nobility and Fallibility* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 245-268.

angels saying before the throne of God in their visions of the heavenly realm. This places the worshipper today even more fully before the throne of God, responding to the realization of God's might and holiness in the same way that the angels do it, with praise.<sup>128</sup> Praise is an expression of delight, or approval. To praise is to say a hearty "Yes!" To affirm something elevates its importance, making it worthy to emulate. In praising God, we affirm to ourselves and to those we pray with, the object worthy of ultimate allegiance and devotion. These paragraphs of the *amida* are a training ground in anti-idolatry desire formation.

With the conclusion of the third blessing the *amida* turns our attention from visioning the God before whom we stand to focus on God's concern. Now we catch a glimpse of what God desires for us. Blessings four, five, and six teach us that God's vision for human flourishing depends on our willingness to become the kind of people who can inherit the complete redemption. We start by becoming learners, the kind of people who are humble enough to open ourselves to knowledge and understanding. True understanding leads to true repentance. Blessings five and six place on our tongue the longing to draw near to God through even more complete service and give us the chance to repent and to let go of regrets from the past in expectation of God's forgiveness. To stand before God is to understand our need and to cultivate a spirit of humility.<sup>129</sup> God is in search of the righteous. The righteous are not perfect; rather they are the people who recognize God's kingship and

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<sup>128</sup> For an introduction to the significance of the overlap between human praise and angelic praise in the *kedusha* see Nissan Daniel Korobkin, "Kedushah, Shema, and the Difference between Israel and the Angels," *Hakirah* 16 (2013): 19-46.

<sup>129</sup> Commenting on the verse, "I set the Lord before me at all times" (Ps. 16:8), Rabbi Yaakov Emden, German Talmudist of the eighteenth century, taught that the fruit of this kind of attitude is seen in the person's humility. See Emden's commentary on *Mishnah Pirke Avot* 4.4 quoted by Samuel H. Dresner, *Prayer, Humility, and Compassion* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1957), 138. See also the teachings of the twentieth-century American Modern Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2003), 34-36 who understood prayer in its essential quality, when it is "service of the heart," as an expression of absolute dependence on God, as an existential cry in awareness of one's need.

seek to live in right relationship to God and to their fellow human beings.<sup>130</sup> These three blessings bring us back to the heart of what makes right living possible, the willingness to learn, repent, and receive forgiveness. These then become a summary of what it takes to find the flourishing that God wants for us.

The next three blessings, seven, eight and nine, describe God's concern that our lives in this world be free from basic wants. These blessings describe God's role in preventing and saving us from misfortune, persecution, ill health, and poverty. God cares about our needs and, thus, it is right for us to care about our own needs as well. The ascetic formation in Jewish prayer places God at the apex of all values, but it then reveals God's love and delight in our embodied pleasure. Ecclesiastes 3:13 illustrates this point: "It is indeed God's gift to man, that he should eat and drink and be happy as he toils."<sup>131</sup> Delighting in life is the right response to the gift of living. God delights in our enjoyment of the gift that existence offers. Heschel points at this truth when he describes our legitimate needs as God's needs for us.<sup>132</sup> These three blessings let us in on God's delight in our freedom, health, and prosperity. They also frame our experience of those goods as God's gift. These blessings resist sloppy critiques of religion as merely training grounds in denying the satisfaction of imminent desire by maintain our awareness of God's desire that we experience material blessings and satisfaction.<sup>133</sup> But these prayers also frame those blessings within a wider story about our purpose such that we understand their value in relationship to other goods.

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<sup>130</sup> Jerome Fredrick Davis Creach *The Destiny of the Righteous in the Psalms* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 3, describes the righteous in this way based on his literary and theological reading of the Psalms as a meditation on the righteous and their destiny.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted by Heschel, *Man's Search for God*, 264.

<sup>132</sup> Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 269.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 262.

God desires that we experience flourishing in this life, but God also desires more than just our individual flourishing.<sup>134</sup>

Blessings ten through fifteen give shape to a Jewish vision of goals bigger than the individual as we describe the goods that will come about in a complete way in the messianic era. The descriptions go beyond any one person's lifetime and from them we learn that our individual good is wrapped up in a hope for a communal restoration.<sup>135</sup>

Blessing ten starts with a call for God to end the exile. I will have more to say about the physical aspect of this hope below. For this blessing I want to draw attention to the end of exile as also the end of separation from one another. The end of exile means an ingathering of the people and a return to the intimacy that comes with sharing life together. This is a good that we will experience in its completeness in the future, but it can be tasted even now in exile. The hope for an ingathering of exiles should stir in us a love for doing life together. The desire God has for our individual prosperity is not all we need to flourish. We also need one another to flourish; we need to make choices to prioritize communal life, even if that requires us to give up maximizing our prosperity or puts us in contexts where we will have to learn to transcend our selfish ego for the sake of relationships.

Blessing eleven speaks of a time when God will be the judge and asks for an end to the sorrow that comes from injustice. The blessing concludes with the words, "you, LORD, are the King who loves righteousness and justice."<sup>136</sup> Justice and righteousness are central

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<sup>134</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

<sup>135</sup> The vision for redemption is fundamentally future focused, but descriptions of that future include reference to restoring goods experienced at points in the past. For example, the use of phrases like: "restore our judges as at first" from blessing eleven or the reference to the descent of "your servant David" in blessing fifteen, suggesting the restoration of the Davidic line. See *Koren*, 120 and 124. Emma O'Donnell in *Remembering the Future: The Experience of Time in Jewish and Christian Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 58, highlights the importance of memory in Jewish visions of the future, analyzing especially the construction of communal memory during Passover and Tisha B'Av and drawing on participant interviews she is able to highlight the way that Jewish liturgical memory is felt by participants as a link between past, present, and future.

<sup>136</sup> *Koren*, 120.

to God's vision for how we are to live together. True justice may only come in the end from God but the descriptions of God as full of "loving-kindness and compassion" and a lover of righteousness also create a standard for what justice looks like. It must be an expression of both a love for righteousness and for compassion. God cares about justice and so should we.

Blessing twelve and thirteen are both about the God of justice acting to rectify the injustice in our world.<sup>137</sup> Redemption cannot be complete without the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the righteous. God needs to deal with the way that our societies have so often rewarded the wicked in this life while the righteous have suffered. Blessing twelve speaks of the informers, those who have been disloyal to their people. These are people who placed their own good above that of others. They are the people willing to wield the power they could get in the non-Jewish world for their own ends, leading to profound injustice.<sup>138</sup> This prayer is not about our desire to rejoice at their downfall, it is a reminder that God is just and those who seem to flourish through arrogant egotistical self-assertion without concern for others will not, in the end, enjoy the blessings of the righteous.

Blessing thirteen is the parallel to twelve. Thirteen asks for God to reward the righteous. This won't be done perfectly until God's values order the Kingdom that is still coming. However, through regular repetition, these blessings are already rearranging what we value in the here and now. Blessing thirteen names a particular set of people who are

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<sup>137</sup> In linking these two blessings together, I am following the logic articulated in B. Talmud *Megillah* 17b and J. Talmud *Berakhot* 2:3, 4b-5a that suggest the judgement naturally leads to the destruction of the wicked and the raising up of the righteous. For a study of these passages see Ruth Langer, *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat Haminim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>138</sup> My interpretation of who the wicked are is vague in order to recognize the many possible referents that could be intended when this prayer is prayed. For a study of the possible identities of the rabbinic-era wicked, see Reuven Kimelman, "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," in *Jewish and Christian Self Definition, Vol.2, Aspects of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman Period*, ed. E. P. Sanders, A. I. Baumgarten and Alan Mendelson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981): 226-44. Medieval forms of this "blessing" functioned as a curse against Christians. The liturgical language of the prayer has shifted over time as it underwent internal development and because of external censorship by Christians in Europe. For an extensive history of this blessing and its evolution see Ruth Langer, *Cursing the Christians?*

worthy of, or in need of, blessing. By naming these people the blessing calls attention to those who ought to function as exemplars for the community. They are described as “the righteous, the pious, the elders... the remnant of their scholars, the righteous converts.”<sup>139</sup> The kind of people celebrated demonstrate both inner devotion and outward action in accordance with that devotion. The righteous are people who fear God and demonstrate this in their morally upright behavior. The pious Heschel describes as longing most of all to live in a way that is “compatible with the presence of God.” Therefore, they maintain an “unconditional loyalty to the holy.”<sup>140</sup> The pious display loving commitment in both wholehearted devotion and in deeds. The “remnant of the scholars” points to the scholars who suffered persecution for God’s sake. Scholarship, though vaunted as a profound ideal in Jewish culture, is not what puts you in this class of those most worthy of God’s blessing. Instead, it is the scholars who have managed to put their learning to practice, persevering in their commitment to God even under dangerous circumstances. The righteous converts are also given special mention, likely because to convert is to make a choice requiring both inward devotion and outward committed action. The unity of heart and will, soul and body, is a window on how wholehearted divine service manifests in our world. Blessing thirteen elevates wholehearted exemplars for us to honor and emulate.

Blessings number fourteen and fifteen bring us to long for the place in this world where God put his name, the city of Jerusalem and for the restoration of the Davidic kingship. This is a longing for God’s presence that also evokes images of a collective geographical and political renewal. It expresses a longing for God’s presence to again dwell in the city, a reference to the *Shekhinah*’s presence in the Temple, and for the restoration of

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<sup>139</sup> *Koren*, 122. We read “set our lot with them” voicing the desire that we would share in their way of being and their reward.

<sup>140</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 356 and 346.

the Davidic throne. Langer describes the centrality of the geographical longing in her summary of the amida as functioning,

...to form a community with Jerusalem at its center, even during almost two millennia of exile. It helped enable Israel to remain a people in spite of its lack of political borders – as it prayed for the restoration of those borders. Therefore, this prayer, and others expressing the same idea, played a central role in preserving the identity of a dispersed people.<sup>141</sup>

The centrality of land and sovereignty to Langer's interpretations reflects the contemporary moment in which Jews have achieved sovereignty in the land of Israel. The amida itself does not mention land or borders. Jerusalem is the place name mentioned and the return to power of God's anointed King, but those images are not the same as a contemporary notion of political borders. Langer is translating the amida's significance into a contemporary language of nationalism in light of her lived experience of a Jewish nation state in a part of the historic lands of the ancient Israelites.

Certainly, the amida played a key role in forming a sense of shared destiny for dispersed Jews all over the world. But the expression of that destiny in the form of a secular nation state is an historical expression of the longing in the amida that remains contingent to the particular historical circumstances that birthed this current version of Jewish sovereignty in God's land. We can see the lack in the contemporary manifestation as a fulfillment of the longing described in the amida by considering the official prayer for the state of Israel. That prayer describes Israel as "the first flowering of our redemption."<sup>142</sup> This phrase suggests that the modern state is part of the eschatological redemption, but

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<sup>141</sup> Langer, "The Amida as Formative Rabbinic Prayer," 151.

<sup>142</sup> Koren, 522. This is a quote from the modern prayer authorized by its chief rabbis which suggests that the secular nation state is the beginning of the eschatological redemption. This idea is in keeping with the theology of Rav Kook. See Joseph Tabory, "The Piety of Politics: Jewish Prayers for the State of Israel," in *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue: Studies in the History of Jewish Prayer*, ed. Ruth Langer and Steven Fine (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 225–46; Dalia Marx, "The Prayer for the State of Israel: Universalism and Particularism," in *All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holy Days*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Jewish Lights, 2014), 49–76.

only in part. It is important that we do not obscure the depth of longing for more than national sovereignty in the amida. To live under God's appointed ruler in God's land with God's Temple and therefore God's presence in our midst is not the same thing as national sovereignty. Too much focus on immanent goods can lead to a genuine confusion about whether or not the Jewish people are still in exile. If we immanentize the vision, then the fulfillment of the political, geographical, and social goods described by the amida will be enough to declare the end of exile. But exile is a theological category marked by the loss of the Temple and a more tangible expression of God's presence.<sup>143</sup>

In addition to the possible loss of attention to the transcendent longings for God within these blessings, there is also a moral danger in aligning the current national state too closely with the hope expressed in the amida. The amida makes God the agent who restores Israel's fortunes.<sup>144</sup> By naming the current Jewish state as the beginning of this redemption we open up the possibility that human agency could be a central, even primary, factor in bringing about other additional elements of redemption.<sup>145</sup> If God's eschatological vision can come about through human hands, should Jews agitate politically to claim sovereignty over the Temple Mount and then work to rebuild the Temple?<sup>146</sup> Are humans responsible for

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<sup>143</sup> On the centrality of Temple to exile see Yerushalmi, "Exile and Expulsion in Jewish History," 8.

<sup>144</sup> Kimelman, "The Daily Amida and the Rhetoric of Redemption," 177, notes that the anticipated Davidic king only appears after God has already assembled the dispersed people, judged the righteous and the wicked, and rebuilt Jerusalem. He concludes, "God alone is the redeemer and restorer of Israel's fortunes."

<sup>145</sup> The legitimacy of human agency in bringing the Kingdom has been and remains a contentious theological idea. On one pole of the contemporary debate as it pertains to the secular nation state, Israel, is Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (1887-1979) the leader of Satmar Hasidim, who led his followers in maintaining a theological rejection of Zionism even after the 1967 war in Israel. His sect remained the most visible holdouts against a religious Zionist consensus. His book, *Vayoel Moshe*, written in 1961, articulates his theological position. An alternate pole is famously articulated by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1835-1965). He described the pre-state secular Zionist pioneers as God's agents because of their commitment to God's concern for the people of Israel and their work to create a Jewish State. For an excellent introduction to Kook's thought and influence on Israeli politics and contemporary Jewish spirituality see Yehuda Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>146</sup> On Jerusalem day in 2022, four Israeli Jews were arrested for praying on the Temple Mount. "Judge Rules against Jews who Prayed at Temple Mount, Accepting State's Appeal," *The Times of*

making the vision of a religious monarchy described in the amida also a reality?<sup>147</sup> Currently Israel is governed as a democracy, but the relationship of the state to religion is quite different from that of most western democracies.<sup>148</sup> Should religious authority be expanded over all areas of Jewish life? These ideas do not currently have much support among contemporary Israeli Jews, but neither are they implausible. A social-imaginary framed by the hope found in this prayer, but not suspicious of human power and agency in bringing about God's dreams, could easily begin to use immanent power to accomplish what are described in the amida as both immanent and transcendent ends.

No matter how one answers these complex questions, these blessings of the amida instill into our social-imaginary a sense that the Jewish people do not ultimately belong just to the national polities in which they live. Our collective identity is bound up in a different destiny from the merely political or culturally defined destinies we share with others through our national identity.<sup>149</sup> The Jewish people's destiny is not merely defined by the

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Israel, May 26, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/judge-rules-against-jews-who-prayed-at-temple-mount-reversing-lower-court-ruling/>. The status quo that excludes Jews from praying at the Haram Al-Sharif does not have the consensus support it once did. See Judah Ari Gross, "Half of Jewish Israelis Back Prayer on Temple Mount, Mostly to 'Prove Sovereignty,'" *The Times of Israel*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/half-of-jewish-israelis-back-prayer-on-temple-mount-mostly-to-prove-sovereignty/>.

<sup>147</sup> This question was particularly potent in early religious Zionist circles. For an overview of this topic see Alexander Kaye, "Democratic Themes in Religious Zionism," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 31, no. 2 (2013): 8-30. See also David Ellenson, "Rabbi Haim Hirschensohn: An Orthodox Rabbi Responds to the Balfour Declaration," *American Jewish History* 101, no. 3 (2017): 247-269 for an introduction to an early halakhic argument for supporting the creation of a democracy in a future Jewish state.

<sup>148</sup> Religious parties have played an important role in coalition building in the Israeli parliament, and Jewish law, as interpreted by ultra-orthodox parties, is used to direct family law for the state. There is public will to expand the imposition of Jewish law into additional aspects of life. For example, in the spring of 2022, ministers from the ruling coalition fought over whether or not people should be allowed to bring their own bread products into hospitals during Passover. "Coalition at Odds Over Allowing Visitors to Bring Hametz into Hospitals on Passover," *The Times of Israel*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/coalition-clash-over-allowing-visitors-to-bring-hametz-into-hospitals-on-passover/>. Michael Wyschogrod, Jewish philosopher and theologian, wrote an article suggesting Israel should be run as a constitutional monarchy with the king, the messiah, absent and thus governed by an elected regent. "A King in Israel," *First Things*, May 2010, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/05/a-king-in-israel>.

<sup>149</sup> For a thoughtful account of the dialectical tension in this sentiment of being in exile and also feeling at home, see Yerushalmi, "Exile and Expulsion in Jewish History," 11. In this essay he

confines of any state-based identity, be that a Jewish or non-Jewish state. The success or failure of any power arrangement does not hold our destiny. We live with a hope for a spiritual-geographical-political reality that was and we trust will be again, because of God's faithfulness.

The eschatological vision of the amida is a vision of better material, moral, political, and spiritual circumstances for the people called to be God's servants. An exilic consciousness is one that recognizes that there is a gap between the world as it is and how it ought to be. *Tefilat keva* is an opportunity to recall how covenantal life came to be, how the disruptions to its ideal form occurred, and to pray for their messianic correction. By forming our "background" awareness of ourselves as living in exile *tefilat keva* situates feelings of existential discomfort with our current reality within the horizon of God's purposes. It is common for people to mistake feelings of discomfort with their life with a lack of certain mundane goods, like a lack of prestige. American Jews, finding a new kind of freedom in American, have often chosen to launch themselves into lives focused on material success and social or political influence. *Tefilat keva* does not work against these other ends, but it relativizes their importance in light of the story of ultimate concern whose highest ends are much grander than anything that can be fulfilled by elite university training and professional connections. A practice of *tefilat keva* provides a different answer to the human longing to be significant. The amida invites people to join their lives to the story of this people called by God to be a light to the nations, a living testimony to the creator God's character, holiness, and sovereignty. This is a purpose we fulfill now with significance across all of time.

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describes much of Jewish history after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE as an experience of simultaneously being ideologically in exile and existentially at home.

Blessings sixteen and seventeen suggest a sense of uncertainty of the suitability of our prayers.<sup>150</sup> They invoke God's mercy; they reflect self-consciousness over the inability to offer God the Temple sacrifices God explicitly asked for in the Torah. These paragraphs also invoke God's compassion, reminding us that God understands the constraints we labor under and does not require perfection to receive our service.

Blessing number eighteen functions to bridge the gap between the world as it is meant to be and the world as it actually is, here in exile. This blessing wrenches our imagination away from the eschatological future and instead returns the praying person to a posture of thanksgiving. One of the dangers of dreaming about an ideal world is the way it can cultivate a desire to try to force that world into being. That desire can quickly come to sanction tyranny and abuse, a zealotry that can burn up the world. Blessing eighteen, a blessing of thanks for the miracles that are already with us, puts a brake on that kind of dangerous outcome.<sup>151</sup> This prayer reminds us that God is the source of all goodness, and we can put our hope in God. This is an attitude that prepares us for the final blessing that is a meditation on peace. Peace, *shalom*, is related in Hebrew to wholeness, *shlemut*, and is described as a blessing that comes from God and is received by those who live in the light of God's face. We return in the end to remembering that standing in the presence of God with our face, and thus our eyes, turned on the Holy One, is where we find true peace. The amida ends in wholeness. It is a training ground for desire for a people who live in exile. By the conclusion of the amida the praying person should have a sense that they have a purpose, to prepare their own hearts for God's kingdom. As we bow ourselves out of the presence of God with words of peace we are meant to enter our life of action with greater clarity for our purpose and heightened awareness of the things that need repair, in our own

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<sup>150</sup> Koren, 124-126.

<sup>151</sup> Koren, 128.

lives, in our family, in our society. But we are called to work on these problems from a place of steady confidence in the God who is the “Rock of our lives” today, the “Shield of our salvation” now, the one who is “with us every day.”<sup>152</sup>

Through praying the amida we become participants in the redemptive promise, perfecting our loves by modeling our loves on God’s loves. During prayer we are not making meaning, we are inheriting meaning by inhabiting a story bigger than us.<sup>153</sup> The amida populates our imagination, nurturing hope. Beginning with a posture of humility stimulated by reflection on the awesome power and holiness of God, the amida opens us to God’s call to learn, reflect, and repent. It proceeds from inner reflection and transformation to a full, this worldly vision, for the restoration of God’s presence in the Temple and all things ordered in accordance with God’s desire for the world. As a thrice daily recitation, the amida is a force of resistance to the desire forming power of consumerism and the allure of secular power. The amida invites us into God’s presence to meditate on God’s vision for our personal and communal flourishing. *Tefilat keva* practiced over these words forms our sense for how to be a people living faithfully between Sinai and the Kingdom, on the way to redemption, on the way to holiness, on the way to making our world the Temple God created it to be. The amida is God’s gift to an exiled people in need of a way to train their *ta’avah* for the coming redemption.

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<sup>152</sup> Koren, 128.

<sup>153</sup> Meaning is not something we make; it is something we experience in the midst of living and making sense of our lives. When religious leaders write about religion as a practice of us making meaning, they are talking like outsiders to the experience. They are adopting a sociological perspective. They should not be surprised when it doesn’t inspire others to also make meaning. It is the outsider perspective that precludes the possibility of meaningfulness. Meaning is like happiness. One can’t attain happiness by pursuing it; one must pursue worthwhile activities and happiness will come as a byproduct. In the same way, one doesn’t make meaning for oneself using *tefilat keva*; one becomes an inheritor of these prayers, learning to pray them and learning to mean them. It is when we inhabit them that they become meaningful.

## 5.2 DEMONSTRATING THE ASCETIC POWER OF *TEFILAT KEVA*: EXPLORING EMOTIONALLY POIGNANT, REPETITIVE PATTERNS

The first part of this chapter focused on describing the *ta'avah* forming properties of implicating a person in a story of ultimate concern defined by the theological paradigm of exile. I pointed to a number of embodied elements of the prayers and their desire forming power. I also highlighted ways in which this exilic narrative forms our loves as a way of preparing us for the coming redemption. All of these observations are primarily based on the elements of *ta'avah* formation learned from Smith's methodological approaches to liturgical asceticism. In the analysis that follows I point to an additional layer of thinking about exilic consciousness. Exile may not be the ideal way of being, but it is not a life without goodness. I focus on two mini-narrative frameworks that I see repeated within the liturgy. The frequency of their repetition lends them to an analysis that draws more directly on Salanter's *hitpa'alut* methodology.

*Hitpa'alut*, as applied by Salanter to the study of musar literature, is repetitive chant of texts often meant to inspire repentance and a renewed commitment to God's service. Salanter taught *hitpa'alut* for the sake of *ta'avah* formation, encouraging it especially for young people but commending it for everyone. The central element of the practice is repetitive emotional engagement with sacred literature encouraging specific ethical ideals and practiced in community.<sup>154</sup> Rabbi Simcha Ziv, one of Salanter's closest and most

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<sup>154</sup> I am applying *hitpa'alut* to prayer, consciously drawing on Salanter's thinking and not the Hassidic use of the term *hitpa'alut* as applied to prayer in the thinking of Habad. R. Dov Baer of Lubavitch (1773-1827) uses the term in *Kuntres ha-Hitpa'alut* where he talks about ecstasy in prayer in the context of his mystical theology. That ecstasy could manifest in trembling, in dancing, even speaking in strange inhuman voices. Salanter's approach to *hitpa'alut* presents it within the context of a different kind of metaphysics and applies it only to the study of Torah. For an extensive discussion of these concepts as used in Habad, see Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 84-92, 98-103; Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 291-300, and index there; Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (Hoboken, NJ: The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University, 1999),

influential disciples, focused on teaching an elite group of younger students the art of musar study he had learned from Salanter. In the third generation, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv's disciples became the core leadership of the musar movement. One of his innovations was to extend the imaginative practice of musar meditation on the virtues to the practice of communal prayer. He encouraged students to slow down during prayers that describe God's moral goodness. They were supposed to use the extra time to allow their minds to settle on each ideal in turn and to consider their own actions in light of these descriptions of the character of God.<sup>155</sup> The way that we learn to read and to engage with texts is a skill that can migrate from the way we read one kind of literature to another. Unsophisticated readers often apply tools for reading in one genre to another genre. In this case, the imaginative elements of musar study and the attentiveness to the centrality of ethics in pious religious life migrated into the way that Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv interacted with the text of the prayer book. It is validating to see that early practitioners noticed that the liturgy could be leveraged to accomplish the ends of Musar study. This evidence supports my suggestion that there could be tangible benefits to applying musar techniques to prayer. What is missing in this precedent is the application of the theological anthropology that stands behind Musar practices to how we think about the function of liturgical prayer. In what follows, I show how the repetitive quality of Jewish liturgy and the practice of saying it habitually creates a context in which the liturgy functions in a similar way to *hitpa'alut* directed toward musar texts. In what follows I unpack two emotionally poignant and repetitive elements in the liturgy that form *ta'avah*.

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174-75; and Arthur Green and Barry Holtz, ed., *Your Word is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

<sup>155</sup> Geoffrey Claussen, *Sharing the Burden: Rabbi Simhah Zissel Ziv and the Path of Musar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 17.

The Jewish liturgy is like a corkscrew, circling a story pattern again and again.<sup>156</sup> Imagine a web with numerous nodes, like a connectome, a comprehensive map of neural connections in the brain.<sup>157</sup> The liturgical story is not told merely linearly<sup>158</sup>; it is more like a neuron passing between nodes, lighting up the same centers again and again but also establishing new links between concepts already mentioned and new applications of the concepts to daily life.<sup>159</sup> The centers that are repetitively returned to function similarly to repetitive recitation of a musar text during *hitpa'alut*. The repetition in the liturgy brings consciousness back mini-narratives that have desire-forming power. The first pattern creates a gift economy and the second generates desire through praise. In the first the liturgy names some element of life as a gift from God followed immediately by a human response in the form of an opportunity to fulfill one of God's commandments or to commit to fulfilling them. God's gift motivates a faithful response. The second describes God's goodness or greatness followed directly by adoration. The realization of divine goodness motivates an act of worship.<sup>160</sup> In each case the human response is called forth by the encounter with God's blessing or God's qualities.

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<sup>156</sup> Kepnes, *Liturgical Reasoning*, 176, notes the repetitive quality of the liturgical themes but offers no reflection on their significance. He writes, "All of the morning service exists in concentrated form in the first, most preliminary part of the morning service, and the rest of the service is a matter of repetition, unpacking, and explicating what has already been given in a nutshell."

<sup>157</sup> For an illustration of a connectome see <https://images.app.goo.gl/cxou2beTCyeciUBH8>.

<sup>158</sup> Kimelman notes the dangers of using linear thinking for an analysis of liturgy. In "The Theology of the Daily Liturgy," 82, he suggests applying a chiasmic structure. I do not find his chiasmic analysis convincing, but his approach shows a willingness to consider alternative organizing structures.

<sup>159</sup> Max Kedushin, *Organic Thinking* (New York: The Jewish Theological Society of America, 1938), argues that rabbinic sources are organized by something he calls "organic thinking" which has a similarity to the pattern that I am highlighting. I am not arguing that this is the conscious organizing structure of the liturgy, but merely that when we reflect on the liturgy, we find these patterns.

<sup>160</sup> Another pattern that Kimelman, "The Theology of the Daily Liturgy," 86, notices in his analysis evokes a memory of the promises of God followed by a commitment to hope and faithfulness as a response. He describes this as creating a link from past redemption to future redemption. "Once past redemption is evoked, hope for future redemption cannot lag far behind..." This is an example of a mini-pattern in which one subject is raised the other is sure to follow. The patterns I highlight here are different from this one but Kimelman's description demonstrates the presence of repetitive elements.

### 5.2.1 A Gift Economy

Let us look briefly again at “The Shema and its Blessings” in the morning liturgy. Both the first and second blessing before the shema reframe everyday existence as surrounded by the gift of God’s mercy and love. The first blessing, *yotzer ha’meorot* (Who creates the celestial lights), speaks of these qualities as demonstrated by the fact that where there is light, there is existence. The goodness of God is revealed in the moment by moment renewal of creation, and the mercy of God in the fact that God gives light to all on earth, the righteous as well as the wicked.<sup>161</sup> Creation is the theme, but the experience of life is restored by this blessing. God who “continually renews the work of creation”<sup>162</sup> is holding us in existence at this very moment. To exist now is to be thought of by God. Every breath we take is evidence of God’s concern. Existence becomes an encounter with God’s mercy in tangible form.

The second blessing, known as *Ahava Rabbah* (great love), is about revelation, but it is also about God’s love. Just as the experience of light and life is an encounter with God’s mercy, so too, the experience of Torah and *mitzvot* are encounters with God’s love. The blessing begins by recounting God’s gifts, reading, “You have loved us with a great love, Lord our God...” It frames the teachings of Torah as evidence of God’s love. They are described as “the laws of life,” a good, life-giving gift to a people chosen in love.

It is from this place of receiving mercy and receiving love that the liturgy then invites us to respond. The shema itself begins with an injunction to hear and then to love. “Listen Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. ... Love the Lord your God with all your

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<sup>161</sup> “In mercy, God gives light to the earth and its inhabitants, and in God’s goodness continually renews the act of creation.” Translation adapted from *Koren*, 90.

<sup>162</sup> *Koren*, 90.

heart....”<sup>163</sup> But this command to love God does not emerge without a context. This is not meant to be an experience of God demanding, “You must love me!” We just meditated on God’s gift of life and the gift of love. We just heard God say, “I love you.” The natural human inclination is to say, “I love you too.” Shema is a response to divine love. Before we dedicate our lives to God, we are brought into contact with God’s merciful and loving gifts. One gift begets another.

“The Shema and its Blessings” constructs an experience of receiving and giving, an exchange of love. The mercy and love of God flows into our consciousness and commitment to God’s kingship and service flows out. It places us into a posture of receptivity: to experience existence as a gift, to find our calling to live the Torah as a gift of love, and to wait with confidence and hope for the gift of redemption from exile that is still to come. While we wait, we repair our *yetzer* by offering our love, morning and evening, as a gift back to God. In what follows I will raise up several instances of this micro-pattern of gift and response in the liturgy.<sup>164</sup>

We find this gift-pattern in the liturgy meant to frame the very first moments of consciousness upon waking.<sup>165</sup> After attaining consciousness, one’s first words are supposed to be, “I thank you, living and eternal King, for giving me back my soul in mercy.

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<sup>163</sup> *Koren*, 98. Classic rabbinic interpretations of this verse say that “with all your heart” means with both *yetzers*, articulating a vision for wholehearted love that includes the service of God with both the good and the selfish/evil inclination, just as Salanter taught. B. Talmud *Brakhot* 54a; *Sifrei Devarim* 32.

<sup>164</sup> I hope that by demonstrating their presence the reader familiar with this liturgy will beginning to see this micro pattern in all the many other places it can be found.

<sup>165</sup> The prayers at the very beginning of the Ashkenazi prayer book are meant to be said as a person wakes each day. Some of the prayers, for example the blessing collection known as *birkhot hashahar*, entered the synagogue service beginning in the Middle Ages. Not every synagogue today includes them in the communal prayer service. For an introduction to the historical development of this service and its migration from a home to a synagogue service see Lawrence Hoffman, “Blessings and Study: The Jewish Way to Begin a Day, in *My People’s Prayer Book: Birkhot HaShachar*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing: 2001, 6-16.

Great is your faithfulness.”<sup>166</sup> This blessing, known by its opening words *modeh/modah ani*, reminds me that it is the faithfulness and mercy of God that is the grounds of my existence today. The next liturgical step of the morning is to ritually wash hands. Along with the action come the words, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has made us holy through His commandments, and has commanded us about washing hands.”<sup>167</sup> The gift of life begets a response in the form of the doing of mitzvah. Gift begets response. The gift of life is channeled toward holiness through the fulfilling of one of God’s commandments.

The next prayer in the *Koren* siddur is a blessing said after relieving oneself.<sup>168</sup> This blessing frames this basic function as a “wonderous deed” of God. Our very survival is dependent on our bodily processes working. God’s wisdom and God’s healing power are demonstrated in this seemingly but ultimately not-at-all mundane act. Following this blessing comes *elohai neshama*, a meditation on the purity of the soul God gives to each one of us. This prayer adds to our sense of blessedness. Read together these blessings affirm God’s role forming both body and soul, showing that both are equally God’s gift to us, and affirming the goodness of embodied life. What do we do with these wisely made bodies and pure souls? Liturgically the next action is to clothe the body in a symbol of God’s commandments in the form of *tzitzit*.<sup>169</sup> A garment carrying *tzitzit* at four corners surrounds

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<sup>166</sup> *Koren*, 4. This prayer is a Lurianic addition added to this moment as a replacement for another prayer אלקי נשמה *elohai neshama* which became part of liturgy said at the synagogue.

<sup>167</sup> *Koren*, 4.

<sup>168</sup> The order of these prayers can vary depending on the prayer book edition and rite. The pattern of gift and response may not look exactly the same in another prayer book, but it will still be present.

<sup>169</sup> Wearing *tzitzit* is done in fulfillment of Num. 15:37-41. It was historically reserved for men and remains largely a male mitzvah even in egalitarian communities. See Shulchan Aruch *Orach Haim* 17:2 Even so we have evidence that at least one woman in the time of the sages wore *tzitzit*. B. Talmud *Menachot* 43b records that Rav Yehuda would attach *tzitzit* to his wife’s garments every morning. How these prayers shape *ta’avah* is not impacted by the gender of the person participating in the ritual. For a review of sources on the permissibility of this mitzvah for women see Aviva Cayam, “Fringe Benefits: Women and Tzitzit,” in *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, ed. Micah D. Halpern and Chana Safrai (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 1998), 119-142.

the body and serves as a reminder to the soul of the desire to fulfill God's commandments.<sup>170</sup> The body and soul are brought together in an act of self-dedication to God's service. The gift of a healthy body and a pure soul inspire an act of dedication of both body and soul to God's service.

Our human response continues by a fulfillment of our obligation to study the Torah every day.<sup>171</sup> As they appear in the standard Ashkenazi prayer book, the act of study is framed as a response to God's gift of body and soul. In the first response to the gift of the soul returned to the body, the body leads the way. It is dressed in God's commandments. In this second response, the soul leads the way through the act of studying Torah. The *Koren* siddur offers three passages for study in fulfillment of the commandment to study Torah. Num. 6:24-26, the priestly blessing, voices the hope that material blessing, God's attentiveness, and God's mercy remain with us.<sup>172</sup> Mishnah *Pe'ah* 1:1 and a quote from the B. Talmud *Shabbat* 127a both refer to the importance of the study of Torah along with "devotion in prayer," "appearance before the Lord [on festivals]," and a collection of mitzvot concerning care for others.<sup>173</sup> Together these passages paint a picture of a life well-lived: a life of devotion to God, of study, and of care for the needy, visiting the sick, and bringing peace between people. They have "no fixed measure,"<sup>174</sup> meaning that there is no maximum limit to them. These are the activities worthy of giving one's life to. These are the actions that make for a beautiful life. Studying Torah is a response to realizing the gift of life led to

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<sup>170</sup> Tur *Orach Haim* 8. This liturgical discussion is about the *tallit katan* which is distinct from the *tallit gadol*. Both are garments containing tzitzit. The *tallit gadol* is the one more often worn by women for prayer rather than the *tallit katan*, probably because wearing the *tallit katan* is difficult under women's fashion. The *tallit gadol*'s liturgical framing invites other insights that I will develop in future publications. For theologically astute and creative interpretations of the symbolic significance of *tallit gadol* see Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning*, 172-173 and Martin Samuel Cohen, "The Tallit," *Conservative Judaism* 44, no. 3 (1992): 3-15.

<sup>171</sup> *Koren*, 8-11.

<sup>172</sup> This interpretation is based on Rashi's commentary on these passages in Numbers.

<sup>173</sup> *Koren* 10.

<sup>174</sup> Mishnah *Pe'ah* 1:1.

by the soul. Through the study of these passages we are invited to meditate on a vision for a flourishing life, a life filled with prayer, study, devotion, and care for others. These words situate a person within a gift economy in relationship to God but also in relationship to others. Each person meditating on these words knows they are a part of a whole community of people learning to also delight in acts of devotion to God and kindness and honor for one another. This vision of a flourishing life is not one in which a person should expect to always be giving to others but never receiving. In reality, the giving flows out as a response to God's giving within a community of people who are also receiving the same tacit *ta'avah* formation. They are also coming to know the goodness of giving, such that the whole community becomes part of a gift economy.

Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer write that early Christian monastic literature emphasizes the need for God's assistance to attain purity of heart; ascetic practice and grit cannot make it happen alone. "Fruitful asceticism" comes about through a humble attitude. They describe the grace of God that helps bring about purity of heart as similar to the experience of the Israelites living on manna in the wilderness: it was given fresh each morning but also required collection. "...[F]ruitful asceticism," they suggest, "requires acknowledgement of need (I must be fed), self-limitation (I cannot feed myself), and dependence on God (only God can feed me)."<sup>175</sup> These attitudes, which they describe as gifts of grace, are expressions of a posture of receptive dependence. I see in the liturgical practices described here a similar expression of dependence made real in our lives through receiving life and health each and every day as a gift. The practice of *tefilat keva* is not a Christian sacrament, but it is a spiritual practice with the ascetic power to cultivate an awareness of the grace present in our daily existence.

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<sup>175</sup> Harriet A. Luckman and Linda Kulzer, *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature* (Colleville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 11.

Gift begets gift, and devotion to God begets care for others. These very first few pages of the liturgy loop around a pattern of gift and response. This pattern does not abate, but recurs elsewhere. When we think of *tefilat keva* as an experience of being washed repeatedly by this embedded liturgical pattern, we can grasp how regular liturgical prayer functions in a way that is similar to *hitpa'alut*. The liturgy offers image after image with the power to reframe our daily experience and thus the way we live. Through liturgical prayer our hearts are assaulted by a vision of God turned towards us with an open hand. *Tefilat keva*, an act whose corollary I described above as sacrifice, is also a source of water for parched and worn-out souls. Instead of experiencing life as an endless litany of obligations, the liturgy works to infuse a new structure for finding what is most significant, what is most worth doing with a life. To be in the presence of the One whose goodness flows out toward us moves our self-centered consciousness into a posture of receiving. It naturally produces a desire in us to give back through personal devotion to God and care for other objects of God's concern, for the wellbeing of others.

### **5.2.2 God's Greatness Evokes Praise and Praise Begets Desire**

The pattern of gift and response is only one recurring liturgical micropattern. A second is descriptions of God wrapped in expressions of adoration and praise. Rabbi Meir, a second-century sage, gave an interpretation of "love God with all your heart" in which he said, "for every breath one takes, one should praise the Creator, as it is written, 'all that breathes praises God' (Ps. 150:6)."<sup>176</sup> R. Meir is describing the path to wholeness of heart that runs through the regular practice of praise. The liturgy actions this teaching through

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<sup>176</sup> *Devarim Rabbah* 2. Translation my own. Hebrew text available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Devarim\\_Rabbah.2.37?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Devarim_Rabbah.2.37?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

this second micro-pattern. The pattern begins with a description of God's goodness followed by bursts of praise, honor, and expressions of love for God. *Tefilat keva* repeatedly puts images of God's goodness before our imagination and then trains us in the proper response to God's presence, which is praise. The praying person gives over their mouth and their imagination to this textual pattern, and by habitually repeating it, the pattern seeps below the imagination into the *ta'avah*; it becomes inscribed on their heart.

This daily repetitive meditation works on *ta'avah* in ways similar to *hitpa'alut*. *Hitpa'alut* was an emotionally potent repetitive practice in which one's whole consciousness was filled with the virtue a person sought to cultivate. Descriptions of God's goodness and praise act similarly. They are repetitive, found as what I'm calling a micronarrative structure throughout the morning liturgy. It is emotionally powerful. When spoken with feeling, praise decenters the self, lifting attention to the object of praise. God, and especially God's goodness, become the full focus of one's whole being. God fills the horizon of consciousness. God's character places before the worshiper virtues worthy of adoration, and emulation. The repetition, emotion, and visions of the ideal are all elements that turn *ta'avah* toward the love of God.

There are many possible examples of this element in the morning prayers.<sup>177</sup> Ps. 146, in *pesukei d'zimra* that precedes shema in the morning, begins and ends with the untranslatable word of praise, "Halleluyah!"<sup>178</sup> The Psalm is situated among other psalms of praise as part of a liturgical unit through which we symbolically complete the whole book of

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<sup>177</sup> Notable places where God's character is both described and praised are the blessings of *birkhot hashahar* (Koren, 27-29) and *ezrat avoteinu* (Koren, 105-107), *ashrei/Ps. 145* (Koren, 72). Reuven Kimelman, "Psalm 145: Theme, Structure, and Impact," *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994): 37-58, describes Ps. 145 as a progressive blessing of God that begins with the individual, advances to the community, and finally ends with a vision of all humanity blessing God. The praise of God is linked in verse 12 to the proclamation of God's holy acts. The great actions of God stimulate all humanity to praise.

<sup>178</sup> Koren, 75.

Psalms.<sup>179</sup> Ps. 146 begins with a command to the soul to praise God all of one's life. Praising God is not something accomplished and set aside; it is an act that attends a whole life. The topic shifts quickly to an admonition not to trust in the powerful of this world whose plans come to nothing as soon as they die.<sup>180</sup> Instead, trust in God "who made heaven and earth."<sup>181</sup> The Psalm then concludes with a list of the kind of things God does. God "secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets captives free, gives sight to the blind, raises those bowed down, loves the righteous, protects the stranger, the orphan and the widow, and thwarts the way of the wicked."<sup>182</sup> The Psalm then ends with a shout of praise, of delight, that God will reign forever.

Three of these descriptions of the kind of action God takes show up as part of a litany of blessings said in *birkhot hashahar*.<sup>183</sup> They become a sign of the greatness of God, establishing an alternative set of goods worthy of praise. In Ps. 146, God's greatness, is contrasted to that of leaders of this world. God's greatness is found in care for the needy and support for the righteous. The values lauded stand in stark contrast to brute displays of power and tyranny, and audacious displays of material wealth and/or social popularity. The Psalm demonstrates the way that praise interrupts this worldly assessment of greatness. This is the King you serve, Israel! These are the concerns of God! God as King subverts idealizing the people with too much of something—too much attention, too much money, too much abusive power—and instead brings our attention to ordinary acts of kindness. God defines greatness as giving food to the hungry, protecting the stranger, the widow and the

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<sup>179</sup> B. Talmud Shabbat 118b. For a discussion of the application of this Talmud reference to the collection of Psalms in pesukei d'zimra see Ruth Langer, "The Early Medieval Emergence of Jewish Daily Morning Psalms Recitations, *Pesukei D'zimra*," forthcoming in *The Psalms in Jewish Liturgy, Ritual and Community Formation from Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Biblical Texts in Dynamic, Pluralistic Contexts*, ed. Claudia Bergmann, Tessa Rajak, Benedikt Kranemann, and Rebecca Sebbagh (Brill, AJEC series, 2022?).

<sup>180</sup> Ps. 146: 3-4.

<sup>181</sup> Ps. 146: 6.

<sup>182</sup> Ps. 146: 8-9.

<sup>183</sup> *Koren*, 29.

orphan, and remaining faithful forever. As we celebrate God, we celebrate an alternative form of greatness. Praise functions like an advertisement. Ps. 146 exposes worldly power as short lived, with little true capacity to save. Instead, praise directs our attention to the one worthy of our service, our model for the goods worthy of a life.

Rene Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* propounds a theory that desire, rather than spontaneously erupting from an authentic inner self, is acquired.<sup>184</sup> We mimic what others admire. When someone else desires an object, we are alerted to its desirability. This takes place because we do not merely desire the object; we want to have a sense of being that we think the other person has. We want what they are.<sup>185</sup> The sense of fullness or completeness we imagine they have become is something that we think we too can have if we love and attain what they love and have.<sup>186</sup> The wisdom of liturgical prayer in community is that it uses this dynamic but deploys it as a tool for the formation of wholeness of heart in God's service. Ps. 146, when prayed with others who mean what they are saying, has a double layer of impact on *ta'avah*. First it reminds us of the acts of kindness that are worthy of honor, in contrast to the way that this world ascribes greatness to the powerful. At the same time, other people's praise for the God of *hesed* draws our hearts toward the same object. Mimesis, within liturgical prayer groups, acts to stimulate desire for God and God's values and concerns. Mimesis works because we think that others have something that makes their lives feel whole and so we mimic what they love. While mimesis can lead us to imitate negative values as well, in the case of wholehearted service of God, it is the right thing to do.

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<sup>184</sup> Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 15.

<sup>185</sup> *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 54

<sup>186</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 146.

Mimesis is inescapable. The question is: will we use it for good or for evil? Salanter understood mimetic power even if he did not theorize about it or know the word. He used it when he worked to bring well respected and socially powerful people to join the daily musar practice in the *beit hamusar*.<sup>187</sup> He knew that people who aspired to be like them would be made curious about this new activity, exponentially expanding the reach of musar into the Jewish community. One might think that there is a kind of corruption at the heart of this move, an acceptance of impure motives, and one would be right. Salanter's musar movement is a piety practice that did not wait for people to purify their motives. They accepted people where they were, inviting people even with improper motives to begin the process of desire formation. They understood that impure motives might get people through the door, but the power of the practice with a majority of people who are practicing with true commitment and longing would be infectious.

This approach echoes my own claims about *tefilat keva* as a source of formation even when we aren't certain about our own motives. There are some motives that can undermine the practice, but the general opaqueness of our motives should not stop us from praying. Motives are hard to pin down and hard to control; what matters is the willingness to participate in the activities designed to help purify the inner life. This does not mean that motives do not matter. On the contrary, in the Shabbat *amida* we pray that God will "purify our hearts to serve in truth."<sup>188</sup> This prayer reveals that purity of heart in God's service is profoundly important, but the fact that we are asking for purity of heart in prayer

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<sup>187</sup> Israel Salanter, "Letter 1," *Ohr Yisrael: The Classic Writings of Rav Yisrael Salanter and his disciple Rav Yitzchak Blazer*, ed. Eli Linas, trans. Rabbi Zvi Miller (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 2004), 147. Hebrew available here: [https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.1.8?vhe=Ohr\\_Yisrael\\_haMenukad\\_Jerusalem\\_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.1.8?vhe=Ohr_Yisrael_haMenukad_Jerusalem_1997&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>188</sup> *Koren*, 486.

demonstrates that there is no expectation that we wait for it before praying. Purity of heart grows through prayer and divine service.

Mimesis suggests the ascetic effectiveness of prayer is amplified by praying with others, but it can also be thwarted. When we voice the words of the liturgy with others who pray with longing, both the liturgical content and the other people we are praying with affect our own *ta'avah*. But when we pray with people for whom the act is perfunctory, the formative power of prayer on desire is limited. Much of this comes less from the easily studied predetermined words of the prayers than from the ways that they are performed.

Uri Ehrlich, in his study of *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer*, describes the power of tone as a tool for conveying meaning.

Shifts in intonation, stress, rhythm, or volume alter meaning; in addition, emotions such as joy, anger or hatred can find expression through vocal means even if the feeling in question has no outlet in verbal content... the expressive vocal system is at the worshiper's disposal, a tool for conveying meaning not just through the words of prayer... When recited by rote or with intense concentration, or by a worshiper driven by urgent need or by contentment with his lot, the same prayer sounds different.<sup>189</sup>

Intonation in all its aspects carries emotional meaning. Not using these expressive tools communicates detachment. If the tone of the prayer leader conveys disinterest, it also subtly conveys that this is a worthless exercise. Perhaps this is why there are halakhic teachings about the kind of person who should lead the congregation in prayer. In *Mishnah Taanit 2:2* the sages discuss who should lead the community in prayer in a time of drought. We are told a worthy prayer leader is someone who has mouths to feed, no money, and no means of making some. Such a person, it is presumed, will pray with deep and fervent devotion, beseeching God in prayer.<sup>190</sup> In the sixteenth-century halakhic code, the *Shulkhan Aruch* (OH 53:11), we read the prayer leader should pray with awe and "weighty

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<sup>189</sup> Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer*, 174.

<sup>190</sup> A tone of supplication is especially important during the amida. See Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer*, 191.

intention.”<sup>191</sup> This worthy mode of prayer is contrasted with the person who has a lovely voice and elongates the service for the sake of self-glorification. That one’s prayer is described as detestable. To lead the community in prayer with a beautiful voice can be uplifting, but if it is for the sake of showing off, the quality of the prayer will be affected. Ego can be felt in the way a person prays. A prayer leader who directs her heart to God will enhance *ta’avah* formation for herself and the congregation. When we pray, mimesis is operative. Every communal prayer service is a training in love. Prayer leaders with worthy intention compound the power of formation on *ta’avah* toward wholeness of heart. Prayer leaders with unworthy intentions like self-aggrandizement or even no intention, saying words merely by rote, have an impact as well. They cultivate the congregants desire to find their own ways of showing off or they train the congregation to shut down and tune out.

The fact that mimesis is inescapable implies that all relationships have a potentially ascetic quality to them. This should lead us each to consider, from whom do I want to learn my desires? It isn’t just the act of praying a liturgy that is ascetic. Salanter understood this when he taught that our *ta’avah* could be negatively impacted by parents and friends when they build up our ego.<sup>192</sup> The formation of our “background” assumptions about the world and what it contains, our vision for human flourishing, is defined for us by the example of teachers, friends, colleagues, communal leaders, and parents. What they truly love comes through, even if it is not what they profess to love. *Tefilat keva* is God’s gift, a source of divine inspiration toward what is truly worth loving. People are filled with need, but our

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<sup>191</sup> Hebrew and English text available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan\\_Arukh%2C\\_Orach\\_Chayim.53.11?ven=Sefaria\\_Community\\_Translation&vhe=Maginei\\_Eretz:\\_Shulchan\\_Aruch\\_Orach\\_Chaim,\\_Lemberg,\\_1893&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh%2C_Orach_Chayim.53.11?ven=Sefaria_Community_Translation&vhe=Maginei_Eretz:_Shulchan_Aruch_Orach_Chaim,_Lemberg,_1893&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>192</sup> Salanter, “Letter 30,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 332. Hebrew available here:

[https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr\\_Yisrael.30.47?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Ohr_Yisrael.30.47?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en).

needs are not all that we are. We are what we aspire to become. To train our hearts through *tefilat keva* is to learn to yearn to praise, to love, and to serve the Holy One.

This brief exegesis of parts of weekday *Shacharit* demonstrates how this ascetic method for studying liturgy uncovers the wisdom of Jewish liturgical life for the formation of flourishing Jewish people and communities. Eli Munk, in his preface to the English edition of his 1935 German commentary on the prayer book, began with these words, “Modern man has lost the capacity to pray.... Prayer fell victim to a culture estranged from God and became degraded to an act of mere habit.”<sup>193</sup> His reflections on the lack of genuine longing for God in the habitual practice of prayer in 1935 could have been written today. Little has changed. American Judaism has seen a resurgent interest in the practice of Torah study.<sup>194</sup> There are new yeshivot in the USA and a new emphasis on lay adult education in Torah learning.<sup>195</sup> However, genuine prayer is still illusory. Just as we have had a revival of Torah learning, we need a revival in communal prayer. This dissertation offers an ascetic lens for thinking about traditional Jewish prayer life in hopes that a better understanding of its formative quality will help us better value and trust our inherited prayer practice to meet our contemporary needs. It is also offered with the conviction that we will pray more effectively if we focus on amplifying the ascetic mechanisms I highlight above.

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<sup>193</sup> Eli Munk, *The World of Prayer: Commentary and Translation of the Siddur*, trans. Henry Biberfeld and Leonard Oschry, ed. Michael Plotkin (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 2007), vii.

<sup>194</sup> Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>195</sup> Non-denominational yeshivas are also growing in the USA. Shira Hanau, “New Jewish Study Programs in Chicago and Washington to Offer Egalitarian Alternatives to Traditional Yeshivas,” *The Forward*, Dec. 13, 2021, <https://forward.com/fast-forward/479446/jewish-study-programs-chicago-washington-egalitarian-yeshiva/>.

### 5.3 CONCLUSION

“Prayer teaches us what to aspire to. So often, we do not know what to cling to. Prayer implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish... the idea becomes a concern, something to long for, a goal to be reached, when we pray...”<sup>196</sup> With these few sentences, Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1954 summarized what this dissertation has named as liturgical asceticism and demonstrated through the analysis of this chapter. *Tefilat keva*, interrupts the flow of the inner life, not with silence but with words, words that cultivate a different direction, a different pathway for consciousness. It is in this interruption of our thought processes, the interruption of the changing landscape of the inner life, with images, emotionally powerful stories, and the repetition of deep truths that prayer carves a channel in our souls. Montaigne describes trying to grasp the self as akin to trying to grasp water.<sup>197</sup> Just as water creates channels, carving riverbeds through stone, ascetic practices can be described as redirecting the ever-flowing stream of consciousness. The content of *tefilat keva* creates channels in our thought lives, and over time, these channels change the course of our stream of consciousness, causing it to pass more readily through pathways of thinking that lead to our highest calling.

A central role of religion, Heschel says, is to allow God to teach us about our ultimate ends.<sup>198</sup> Our own ego is not worthy of being our ultimate end. When we live merely to satisfy ourselves, we end up dissatisfied. Our lives must be for something bigger than ourselves if we are to be happy. Liturgical asceticism asks, “what can we learn about God’s ends, about God’s purposes, about God’s concern, by looking closely at the desire-forming

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<sup>196</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 7.

<sup>197</sup> Michael de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, Florio translation (New York: Modern Library, 1933), 545.

<sup>198</sup> Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God*, 248.

elements of the liturgy?” This thrice daily set of prayers describes God’s desire. To pray it habitually is to offer one’s imagination over to God on a daily basis. What does God offer in exchange? The rewiring of our desires in light of God’s desires for us. God desires our flourishing, individually and collectively. By responding to God’s mercy (*yotzer or*) and love (*ahava rabba*) with shema, the commitment to place God first in our heart, we transcend our own ego. But that does not mean that we abandon our love of life or our love of creation. Heschel summarizes this way of being simply: “Loving the Creator does not exclude love of the creation, but it does involve a specific approach to all values. God is before all things, and all values are looked at through Him.”<sup>199</sup> God desires our flourishing, but he desires more for us than just our flourishing. By finding our good on the other side of God’s need, we come back to our needs and those of others, but with greater purity of heart.

In the Shabbat and Holiday amida, there is a paragraph that links together with the experience of being satisfied purity of heart in God’s service, joy in God’s salvation, and holiness found through God’s commandments.<sup>200</sup> Satisfaction is not an easily attained feeling. Desire is like water; it is easily stirred. We are skillful at sensing our own needs. Marketing is an entire industry with one goal, to stimulate a feeling of insufficiency, to destroy feelings of satisfaction. What can we do to find satisfaction? This dissertation suggests that *tefilat keva* is one answer. Opening our lives to the practice of habitual prayer forms our loves and our visions of the good life.

*Tefilat keva* opens a door to our hearts. It takes what are abstract concepts that we might intellectually assent to and roots them into our being. They become come part of the very furniture of our lives forming the “background” of our consciousness, guiding us pre-

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<sup>199</sup> Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God*, 283.

<sup>200</sup> *Koren*, 486. “Make us holy through Your commandments and grant us our share in Your Torah. Satisfy us with Your goodness, grant us joy in Your salvation, and purify our hearts to serve you in truth.”

cognitively toward actualizing certain ends. The liturgical asceticism I've modeled here tries to make these dynamics conscious for the purpose of demonstrating the wisdom of the practice and to establish that there is an ascetic telos at the heart of Jewish life. But I have also revived the ascetic discourse with training wheels. A liturgical asceticism for our time must remain chastened by the standards articulated in Taylor's "maximal demand." Any description of the telos of Jewish life must ask, "does the vision for human flourishing denigrate ordinary human fulfillments or does it imagine human existence from such a shallow perspective that it cannot address the genuine evil that lurks within the human heart?"

A flourishing contemporary conversation about Jewish obligation will include a description of the telos of halakhic life, but it will also admit critique and honest reflection on how ascetic practices are meeting people in their daily lives. Wholehearted service does not manifest in only one form. The vision of wholehearted Jewish life is not about creating sameness. Each person who attains *shlemut* will manifest unique aspects of this way of being. *Shlemut* is not to be sought in ways that deform human life. The ascetic conversation I am commending must always make space to reflect and refine, and in this way demonstrate the character of God who did not make a world to control, but a world to delight in.

This chapter is an application of the theological anthropology gathered from Salanter's teaching and integrated with the thinking of Smith and Fagerberg about liturgy's role in ascetic formation. Following the example of Fagerberg's liturgical asceticism, in this chapter I approached liturgical life as a gift of God, a spiritual practice for equipping the Jewish people to attain their calling and live their mission. With the help of Smith and Salanter's understandings for how tacit desire formation takes place, I investigated the liturgy for: a story of ultimate concern, habitual meaningful embodied action, and repetitive

emotionally power elements. I looked at all of these elements and offered a description of the unique social-imaginary they cultivate, focusing on the visions of the good life and how they all participate in forming a person toward wholehearted divine service. Because of Coakley's example of how to recover asceticism with wisdom for its potential dangers, and because of what I learned from Taylor's "maximal demand,"<sup>201</sup> I included descriptions of how this worldly flourishing is included and even encouraged by the practice of *tefilat keva*.

By explicating parts of the weekday morning liturgy, I demonstrated that *tefilat keva* implicates Jews in a story whose major moments are marked by Sinai, Exile, and the coming Kingdom of God. By placing worshipers into this context, the liturgy shapes the way they imagine their world, creating wide horizons under which the concerns of each individual and their daily life are given a context. The liturgy communicates to the worshipper a sense of mission, to show the goodness of wholehearted service of God and a picture of what the final redemption looks like. It inculcates within the worshiper a sense of significance by joining their life to God's purposes. Paying attention to this overarching narrative revealed the role of sin and misdirected desire in causing exile, placing the purification of desire as a central task while we inhabit the exile. To live faithfully in light of Sinai, we must pass through the process of *ta'avah* formation so that we can become the wholehearted servants of God who will be prepared to inherit the Kingdom.

My claim that liturgical life is an ascetic act, an act that purifies *ta'avah*, created a unique interpretation of the purpose of central elements of the daily liturgy like the shema

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<sup>201</sup> Maintaining the goodness of ordinary human experience, of simple desires, is one element of Taylor's "maximal demand," a way of talking about transcendent ideals that can be pursued without "purging, or denigrating, ordinary fulfillments." The other element is a concern with "bowdlerizing" the human condition. This involves lowering expectations for human flourishing to a point that "normal" people are expected to reach it without too much effort and, in so doing, this involves misrepresenting the human condition. This limited, non-transcendent, approach leaves many unsatisfied, but unsure of why, and also loses track of the great variety of challenges humans face. It creates a society that has no wisdom to offer and no path toward a better life for the "deviant" because they misunderstand the full scope of human frailty. See Charles Taylor, *Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 640-641.

and amida. Considering them in light of their role in forming the worshippers' understanding of their place with a story of ultimate concern and by highlighting the meaningful embodied acts that accompany their practice, I showed how shema discloses wholehearted love of God as the calling of every Jew. Each and every articulation of the shema, under this reading, becomes both an opportunity to impress the ideal of wholeheartedness on *ta'avah* and a reminder of the dangers of letting our desires own us. *Tefilat keva* trains the worshipper to realize that true satisfaction in life is found in centering the love of God as one's highest love.

The amida revealed that training our *ta'avah* to love God does not lead to a life of austerity. In fact, by reading the amida as a description of God's vision for flourishing human life, we learn of God's hope that we enjoy lives freed from our naturally narrow selfish *ta'avah* that leads to sin and guilt. Instead, God hopes for our freedom from our pettiness and for lives filled with bountiful health, sufficient wealth, communal connection, and a sense of purposefulness. The act of service of God that is the amida, understood as an ascetic act, becomes a meditation that shapes the practitioner, stimulating a posture of both longing and acceptance.

The visions for a life well lived, expressed in my exegesis of the imbedded social-imaginary of *tefilat keva*, reveal ideals that transcend those of simple capitalist secular humanism. God's dreams for the world include our delighting in the gift of life, but also expand our sense of what matters beyond the selfishness encouraged by popular culture. By putting their lives into a story with a much broader horizon and by training *ta'avah* toward God's vision of a flourishing life, worshippers undergo a countercultural formation toward a wholehearted life of divine service. Liturgical life constructs for worshipers a different sense of what is worth desiring. *Tefilat keva* is an act of re-formation of *ta'avah*, for the sake of attaining freedom from the narrow meanness of a merely self-centered existence. It is a

spiritual practice that empowers worshipers to become, in their own unique ways, manifestations of their calling to find their ultimate satisfaction in their mission as wholehearted joyful servants of God.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I showed how the normative habitual practice of liturgical prayer, *tefilat keva*, is a gift of God for the Jewish people's ascetic formation. *Tefilat keva*, is a perception-shifting activity, changing the horizon of our understanding, creating a different mindfulness about the significance of our daily actions as we become formed in ways that transcend the ordinary commitments we share with other people not engaged by this practice. *Tefilat keva* embeds within us a vision for flourishing that leads us to desire distinctive "ends." The Creator knows the kind of creatures we are, and thus, what really satisfies. The vision of the good life in a time of exile, illuminated by my method of inquiry, revealed a vision for experiencing satisfaction through having one's desires formed through the practice of *tefila*. Elements of the social-imaginary I uncovered in *tefilat keva* included the cultivation of a joyful delight in the daily goodness of living, a sense of belonging to a shared project with others, a longing for wholehearted devotion, and delight in God who is met in the doing of God's will. The ascetic power of *tefilat keva* brings to mind Ezekiel's description of a future when our stony heart will be replaced with a heart of flesh, empowering us to attain the true heights of faithful observance.<sup>1</sup> The *mitzvah* of *tefilat keva* is an activity of heart training, an ascetic exercise that begins the heart transplant described in Ezekiel and makes it possible for us to attain true satisfaction in life even before the manifestation of God's Kingdom.

Through recovering Rabbi Israel Salanter's theological anthropology and the construction of a conversation about liturgical asceticism between Taylor, Coakley, Fagerberg, and Smith, I both expounded an authentic Jewish ascetic ideal and created a new

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<sup>1</sup> Ezek. 36:26-27.

method for reflecting on liturgy as a desire forming activity. Taylor, Coakley, Fagerberg, and Smith all inspired various elements of the creation of a Jewish liturgical asceticism. In what follows I summarize ways in which these Christian theologies I studied functioned as models for what I accomplished. And I am aware that their role as models is not exhausted by my work here. There are also directions for applying the definition of liturgical asceticism I developed and for the continued application of an ascetic approach to practice that could grow out of what I have accomplished. In what follows I will also describe some of these areas for ongoing theological reflection opened up by what I have already accomplished.

## **6.1 THEOLOGICAL MODELING**

This project was made possible by the challenge of confessional comparative theology to look deeply at another tradition to find something you wish your home tradition knew. I mentioned in the introduction that Christian theologians serve as models for the work I do here. In short, here are some of the essential ways in which each modeled an important component of this project.

I saw in the work of David Fagerberg, Sarah Coakley, and James K. A. Smith theological reflection on practice that is comfortable speaking within the mythos and logic of the Christian tradition while also integrating wisdom and way of making sense of the world from the analysis of outsiders, be they philosophers, psychologists, or feminist theologians. There are not a great many examples of confident Jewish theologizing within the academy for reasons I explained in the first chapter. These Christian scholars modeled for me what Jewish theology within the contemporary academy could sound like. They

demonstrated a posture of inquiry that I continue to seek to emulate, knowing that I have only begun to approximate it.

Fagerberg, Coakley, and Smith all put practice at the heart of their theologies. This privileging of practice makes their approaches more useful as models, since normative Judaism ascribes a prominent place to practice. Smith was particularly helpful as a model for understanding how practice forms a social-imaginary. His work got me interested in finding Jewish theological language about the tacit formation of pre-rational elements of the self. He also modeled a way of integrating insights from continental philosophy of knowledge with religious anthropology by showing how one could construct a theory about religious formation from the thinking of Bourdieu, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Augustine. It was his model that sent me looking for a Jewish articulation of desire formation that could serve a similar function to Augustine. It also helped me recognize Salanter's understanding of desire formation as uniquely useful for thinking about tacit elements of desire. Smith's model showed me how useful it can be to recover a deeply rooted Jewish anthropology, but to speak of it along with contemporary philosophical theories. Together they can help describe aspects of human formation that we would not have seen unless they were brought together.

It was the work of Coakley who especially motivated me to frame my own recovery of an aspirational Jewish discourse about practice as an asceticism. She showed me that asceticism was a discourse that couples ideals with practices of self-formation. Her influence helped me to see that talk about desire formation was just another way of talking about asceticism. To frame the project as the recovery of an ascetic perspective on practices roots this dissertation into an older theological conversation that precedes the modern era.

## 6.2 A METHOD FOR STUDYING THE ASCETIC POWER OF LITURGICAL PRAYER

Through the modeling offered by these different Christian thinkers, I created a standard for building ascetic discourse within Judaism, recovered an ascetic vision for the “ends” to which a life of Jewish practice is properly directed, and I articulated an ascetic approach to prayer that focuses attention on the tacit desire-forming elements of the practice. The method I developed for reflecting ascetically on liturgical prayer is guided by the following claim constructed from the theological arguments across the various chapters: *Tefilat keva is a habitual, fully integrated, intellectual, emotional, and bodily act that repairs ta'avah (tikkun ha'yetzer) over the course of a lifetime through the formation of a social-imaginary sustained by a vision of Jewish life's end in shlemut.* Each element in this definition has been explained in detail over the course of this project but I will summarize briefly here.

“*Tefilat keva*” is how I refer to the act of traditional structured communal praying inherited from the past and said at fixed times. By *keva* I do not mean prayer without intention but rather non-spontaneous prayer. This kind of prayer comes about because of God’s command that we pray. It is a *mitzvah* and thus a gift from God, the fulfillment of an act that God knew we needed because of the kind of creatures we are.

My approach to Jewish asceticism depends on the description of an ideal Jewish way of being, *shlemut*, recovered from the writings of Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Musar movement. It is his theological anthropology and vision for what Jews are called to become that gives this dissertation the vocabulary needed to talk about asceticism from within a Jewish theological anthropology. Israel Salanter’s theological anthropology is also the source for my understanding of the essential challenge to our ability to attain *shlemut*. In chapter four, I recover Salanter’s understanding of the basic human orientation to the world

and what drives human action. From him, I extract the idea of a pre-cognitive soul-force, *ta'avah*, that is the true generator of the *yetzer ha'ra*, the source of human selfishness. Salanter understood that *ta'avah*, even though it is a pre-rational force, could still be formed. It could be fostered and amplified, resisted and subjugated, or repaired and sweetened. *Shlemut* comes about through the repairing of *ta'avah*. In its repaired state, *ta'avah* expresses desire for God and God's service, creating a unity of intention and action, desire and will, wholeness of heart.

Salanter's approach to the human condition, when examined alongside Smith's liturgical anthropology, revealed a number of similarities in their thinking, but it also showed that each theory could enhance the other. They both emphasize the power of pre-theoretical orientation as determinative of what people desire. Smith's liturgical anthropology, as I explain in chapter three, points to worship, story, imagination, and meaningful habitual action as elements of formation for this tacit aspect of the self. Salanter focuses on habitual meditation on the good and on communal emotionally profound expressions of longing, both key elements in the practice he developed called *hitpa'alut*. When brought together these two theories revealed a variety of elements to look for within *tefilat keva* in order to understand its power to form *ta'avah*.

By integrating Smith's description of the pre-conscious self with Salanter's understanding of *ta'avah* I found an expanded approach to the human condition. It is selfishness and the impacts of our social-imaginary that create resistance against the love and service of God. Both elements of our tacit formation cause disordered desire that distract us from the vision of flourishing that God has for us when we live into our purpose as God's servants. God made us with the capacity for desire and the capacity to experience satisfaction of that desire, but only when our *ta'avah* is trained on God as our highest and

best desire. How do we get free from the constraints of our own selfish and misdirected desires?

The argument of this dissertation is that *tefilat keva* is one Jewish answer. It is the kind of activity that both trains *ta'avah* and reforms our imagination, leading to *shlemut*. In chapter five I demonstrate my argument by showing how the *mitzvah* of *tefilat keva* is an act that integrates body and mind, emotion and imagination, implicating a whole person, body, imagination, intellect, and heart in a story of ultimate concern and a vision of the “ends” of a flourishing Jewish life. *Tefilat keva* has all the components of an ascetic, desire-forming, practice. It implicates the Jewish people in a story that invites us into a relationship with the God who called us at Sinai and offers us a mission. It engages our imagination in God’s vision of a good life, teaching us the value of this-worldly joys, neither denigrating them nor making them the ultimate purpose of our lives. It repetitively reframes our service of God as a response to God’s goodness, restoring our capacity for giving by helping us notice what we have received. It is an act that is done with body as well as with the mind, resisting the mind/body dichotomy, using the mind and the body to reach the heart. All that we are is brought together in the *avodah* of *tefilat keva*. Through the imagination, the body becomes inscribed and implicated by the story along with the mind. Through examining the weekday morning liturgy for the tacit elements of ascetic formation that I learned from Salanter and Smith, I revealed an ascetic aspect to this spiritual practice.

Gavin Flood understands asceticism as the formation of a self through order and limitation within a tradition for the sake of some higher freedom.<sup>2</sup> In chapter two I began this project suggesting that an ascetic approach to liturgical prayer would allow us to understand how liturgical prayer acts to order and limit, to structure a life, for the sake of

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<sup>2</sup> Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13.

creating a skillful person who inhabits a different, more free, way of being from others.<sup>3</sup> The definition of Jewish liturgical asceticism constructed in this project reveals a particular Jewish vision for the “ends” of life that stands in contrast to other accounts of the good life offered by contemporary narratives based in nationalistic, materialistic, individualistic visions of reality. The ascetic formation found through *tefilat keva* frees a person from misplaced longing and misdirected attempts at finding a fulfilled life and a sense of satisfaction. But the ascetic formation that I describe is also not aggressively opposed to these other formations. In keeping with Taylor’s “maximal demand,” the transcendent vision of life that I describe in this project incorporates the enjoyment of goods available in more mundane visions of human flourishing but in a way that does not mistake them for the ultimate source of satisfaction in life. The transcendent “ends” discovered by paying attention to the desire forming elements in the act of *tefilat keva* give the goods of sexual partnership, children, material wellbeing and professional success back to us as goods we can enjoy for what they really are. None of them are freighted with the responsibility of giving us a sense of complete satisfaction. This dissertation suggests that through regular liturgical prayer we will come to find the right balance and discover that satisfaction is found only in God’s service.

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 36-37, George Lindbeck describes the person who has been formed by a tradition as a saint, defined as someone who is able to function within the language and symbol set of a tradition, capable of intuitively discriminating between authentic and inauthentic expressions of a tradition, and able to use its symbols and language to make sense of her own experiences.

### 6.3 JUST THE BEGINNING

This project contained two distinct steps. First, I had to recover a Jewish asceticism, a way of talking about the "ends" of a life well-lived from within the logic and mythos of the Jewish tradition and understanding of the human condition. Once I had a way of understanding the ascetic element, I then had to apply this understanding to the liturgy, creating a method for reflecting theologically about the ascetic elements of this particular *mitzvah*. In both aspects of this project, I was inspired by the model of Christian theologians whose work had already demonstrated the value of retrieving asceticism and how liturgy could be understood as a formative activity. But the work accomplished so far is really just the beginning for both the recovery of asceticism within Jewish theology and for the creation of a method for reflecting theologically on the liturgy's ascetic power.

Salanter's claim that wholeheartedness in divine service is the goal of human life could be studied in comparison with other visions of the Jewish mission, for example, the biblical call to holiness or the kabbalistic ideal of *devekut* (cleaving to God). Do these visions align? Do they work together or in opposition to one another? Are they all a part of some other end? What is the role of desire formation in each?

How might this ascetic understanding of a flourishing Jewish life develop a new appreciation for the wisdom and even the purpose of other *mitzvot*? What is the role of desire formation in Torah study and in acts of lovingkindness? Are all *mitzvot* properly ascetic or is desire formation properly only found in the *mitzvot* that pertain to how a person relates to God? Many questions like these and more could expand our understanding of asceticism within Judaism.

Even just starting from the description of how liturgy works that I created in this dissertation, there are a number of new directions for a Jewish liturgical asceticism.

Applying the liturgical asceticism method I demonstrated to other prayer services would add to our image of the social-imaginary cultivated in habitual prayer. Prayer services could be analyzed for the goods they promote through the visions of human flourishing they imply, for the way that they cultivate love for God and wholeheartedness. Taylor describes a social-imaginary as carrying an implicit picture of human flourishing with a wide variety of components that include:

what good relationships look like, what a just economy and distribution of resources look like, what sorts of recreation and play we value, how we ought to relate to nature and the nonhuman environment, what sorts of work count as good work, what flourishing families look like, and much more.<sup>4</sup>

A Jewish liturgical asceticism could profitably uncover how the liturgy shapes our tacit way of relating to these topics and others. How does liturgy form our imagination about what flourishing looks like in our home life, economic life, political life, national life, etc.? These are all possible directions to take this new way of theologizing about Jewish liturgy.

Liturgical asceticism also makes apparent the wisdom of the habitual practice of liturgical prayer by uncovering the mechanism by which prayer disciplines the self toward wholehearted living. Further work might consider how we are made better citizens, mothers, fathers, coworkers, etc., through participating in the patient disciplining of our desires through our bodies. Liturgical asceticism will be able to demonstrate ways that liturgical modes of life empower maturity and goodness. High ethical standards, like attending to the otherness of the other, require a skillfulness that is cultivated, not bought or found merely through intellectual assent. Liturgical asceticism could be used to consider

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<sup>4</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 53.

what learning to love God with a whole heart does for our skillfulness at living together with others.<sup>5</sup>

My own application of an ascetic lens to *tefilat keva* in chapter five focused on how the practice reforms our desire toward wholehearted service of God. There is great potential for thinking further about this metaphor of servitude and its implicit power dynamics. How does liturgical practice form our awareness of God's character? The voice of God found in the liturgy of shema is merciful, loving, and wise.<sup>6</sup> God is revealed in the amida as the one who coaxes but does not force, profoundly patient, willing redemption but not forcing the end, in need of human participation.<sup>7</sup> What does the reveal to us about how we ought to hold power? A liturgical asceticism will lead to observations like these, and more questions, opening up learning about who we serve, and thus about what it looks like to use our own power rightly.

Sarah Coakley defines ascetic formation as requiring the integration of intellectual, spiritual, and bodily practice over a lifetime, sustained by a complete vision of the "ends" of life.<sup>8</sup> What is the difference between praying these prayers as a young person and praying them still fifty years later? Salanter believed that the *yetzer ha'ra* changed and grew with people over their lifetimes, making some techniques more helpful than others at different stages of life.<sup>9</sup> Does liturgical prayer impact desire in different ways at different times of life? How might we support its formative power for children, young adults, mature adults, etc.? How can an ascetic understanding of liturgical prayer change what and how we teach

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<sup>5</sup> Coakley's descriptions of the ethical formation through contemplative practice offers an example of the kind of theological reflections still waiting to be done about Jewish prayer life. See Chapter 2 pages 89-93.

<sup>6</sup> See the study of the shema above page 231-243.

<sup>7</sup> See the study of the amida above pages 243-261.

<sup>8</sup> Paraphrase from Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 18.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 4, page 192ff.

prayer or conduct prayer services? Can the story of ultimate concern be consciously taught so that the allusions to it in our prayer services are less opaque? Can we enhance the power of the micro-narratives or the embodied elements of the practice? What are the implications of an ascetic focus on how we will use music in prayer, what part of the service we will sing, how we construct prayer spaces? How might an emphasis on enhancing the ascetic quality of prayer change our calculus around praying in the vernacular?<sup>10</sup>

I have avoided all discussion of gender in this dissertation, but gender plays a strong role in traditional Jewish communities who are some of the most faithful in praying the liturgy. The gendered dynamics impact who leads prayers, where and with whom prayers are normally said, whether a person prays with *tallit* and *tefillin*, how regularly they are encouraged to pray these specific words, etc. The ascetic formation of regular prayer is necessarily impacted by these kinds of dynamics. What alternative ascetic practices are operative for women who are discouraged from participating in *tefilat keva*?<sup>11</sup>

There are many different directions an ascetic approach to liturgical prayer might take. At the heart of all these possible directions for Jewish liturgical asceticism is a posture of humility, an intuition that begins from the assumption that liturgical life is a wise gift handed down to us for the reformation of our hearts. As a method it calls for an attentiveness to how habitual embodied action, made sensible by an emotionally compelling story of ultimate concern, forms a person toward a complete vision of Jewish life. A Jewish liturgical asceticism is curious about *tefilat keva*'s role in what we come to cherish and the

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<sup>10</sup> Talmudic-era laws of prayer demonstrate a willingness for individuals to pray in the vernacular to enable general participation, but there is a preference for Hebrew, especially for communal prayer. See Langer, *To Worship God Properly*, 22-23; Haim Halevy Donin, *To Pray as a Jew* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 17; and *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim* 101.

<sup>11</sup> For a reflection on the formation of a female Jewish subjectivity through the physical and psychological work of childrearing see Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self*, 27. In it she approaches child rearing as an embodied practice with theological and ethical implications for the formation of an "obligated self" for Jewish women. She touches on desire formation through embodied practice when she discusses the complex relationship of love and obligation revealed in the relationship of mothers and children. She draws briefly on Jewish liturgy of the shema to elaborate her point.

choices we make in how we use our lives.<sup>12</sup> It will approach the study of liturgy with academic rigor but also with a comfort in using theological categories to describe the formative work of prayer in our lives. These are some of the elements of the method that will unite the many possible topics for research.

Finally, there are also other directions this project could have taken with regard to the possible methods of comparison available to comparative theologians. This dissertation does not spend time doing comparisons between the content of Jewish asceticism and the content of Christian asceticism. That is because I focused on doing constructive theology for the Jewish community instead of on rectifying Jewish or Christian misconceptions of one another's practices. It is certainly the case that a study of liturgy as an ascetic act in both traditions could turn up some interesting similarities and differences in the social-imaginary cultivated by the distinctive liturgies.

#### 6.4 A COMMUNAL NEED

This dissertation is an example of how studying contemporary Christian theology as a Jew can inspire constructive Jewish theology that helps Judaism reflect on its own practice in fresh ways. Jewish theologians lack sufficient number of colleagues engaging Jewish theology within the academy. Learning to think with but also adapt Christian theological methods is a powerful way for Jewish theology to continue to grow.

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<sup>12</sup> Liturgical asceticism is ultimately interested in what Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (Santa Fe, NM: Aurora Press, 1996), 7, describes as a special power of prayer. He writes, "Prayer teaches us what to aspire to. So often we do not know what to cling to. Prayer implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish. Redemption, purity of mind and tongue, or willingness to help, may hover as ideas before our mind, but the idea becomes a concern, something to long for, a goal to be reached when we pray..."

This project is an act of recovery, creative imitation, and adaptation. It began with learning various styles of thinking theologically about asceticism, liturgical theology, and desire formation from Christian theologians. Their example inspired me to look for an aspirational discourse about the goods of a normative halakhic prayer life that would address the desire forming elements of Jewish practice. I discovered a lack of rigorous and theologically deep reflection within contemporary communities of practice about what we are doing when we pray our liturgies. Within halakhic Jewish life we spend much of our time talking about what we must do, how we are to fulfill the bare minimum obligations we have to God. But we need to talk not only about the rules but also about the ideals. What we aspire to will impact the quality of our practice. Since asceticism is a conversation about ideals attained through practices that form desire, the creation of a new Jewish asceticism offered a way to spur the community on to more reflection on practice.

In the 1950's Heschel reflected on a common theological approach to halakhic practice that he described as "pan-halakhic theology." It was based on the claim "that obedience is the substance rather than the form of religious existence; that the law is an end, not a way."<sup>13</sup> When obedience is the sum total of religious existence there is no ideal to strive for outside of greater obedience, no end toward which Jewish life is directed beyond doing *mitzvot* well enough to be counted as having done them. This is a vision for Jewish life which makes the bare minimum the ideal. This way of thinking maintains a strong hold over observant Judaism in America. It defines what kinds of questions about practice are asked and answered and narrows the scope for theological reflection about *mitzvot*. Recovering a discourse about halakhic life as "a way" with aspirational goals beyond achieving a life of

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<sup>13</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 323.

halakhic behaviorism, while not undermining the necessity of *halakhic* practice, is a pressing concern.<sup>14</sup>

Heschel said the solution to this problem was to return *halakha* and *aggadah* to the very heart of Judaism.<sup>15</sup> Aggadah's purpose was to envelope halakha within a relational context, providing the narrative of ultimate concern for the *halakhic* way of life. David Novak, in an essay defending the idea that there is such a thing as Jewish theology published in 2021, rearticulates the same intuition but this time about theology. Jewish theology's job, he claims, is to act like *aggadah*, to situate *halakha* within the relationship of God and the Jewish people.<sup>16</sup> For both Heschel and Novak the answer to an overdependence on *halakhic* reasoning to define the shape of all of life is to retrieve theology, the discourse on the divine human relationship within which the obligations to a halakhic life make sense.<sup>17</sup>

This dissertation shows how one might do this through a recovery of Salanter's theology of the human condition and his understanding of God's call to wholehearted living. By offering a way of talking ascetically about the ends of halakhic life, this project cultivates

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<sup>14</sup> In a recent interview, Rabbi Jeremy Wieder, Rosh Yeshiva at the modern orthodox Yeshiva University, described the need to direct our halakhic lives toward the goal of holiness as described by the Ramban. The Ramban's position he summarized as "You shall be Holy." See Ramban's commentary on Lev. 19:2 in which Ramban describes the command to be holy as referring to a calling toward moderation, a training of desire toward the avoidance of unnecessary luxuries, and the general directing of a person's goal in life toward doing what is right and good so that a person can ultimately cleave until the Lord who is Holy. R. Wieder suggests that mistaking a halakhic lifestyle as the totality of what we are striving for makes the bare minimum the ideal and misses the point of a religious life. His interviewer, R. Scott Kahn describes R. Wieder's claim as "the most important issue in Judaism today." See Scott Kahn, interview with R. Jeremy Wieder, "The Orthodox Community's Obsession with Materialism," *The Orthodox Conundrum*, podcast audio, Feb. 15, 2022, <https://jewishcoffeeshouse.com/the-orthodox-communitys-obsession-with-materialism-a-conversation-with-rabbi-jeremy-wieder-99/>.

<sup>15</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 337.

<sup>16</sup> David Novak, "What is Jewish Theology," 27.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Altmann, in his 1933 essay, "What is Jewish Theology?" in *The Meaning of Jewish Existence*, trans. E. Ehrlich and L. H. Ehrlich, ed. A. L. Ivry (Hanover: NH: Brandeis University Press, 1991), 45, sets the upholding of *halakhic* practice as the standard for determining the authenticity of any Jewish theological system. While this standard put outside of legitimate theology a number of antinomian contributions to twentieth century "Jewish thought" including the work of Martin Buber, it remains a standard that I believe properly understands theology's role within traditional forms of Judaism.

a new awareness for the normative practice of prayer as more than a legalistic requirement. Of course, the requirement to pray is a minimum standard, but it is not the goal. With the help of Israel Salanter, I uncovered how a committed normative Jewish prayer life is both an act of service to God but even more deeply it is a gift of God for the formation of our desire and ultimate enjoyment of satisfaction through God's service.

My approach to asceticism in this dissertation fulfills a need for theological reflection on the ideals of Jewish observant life with respect to *halakhically* proscribed prayer. It also does more than that. Taylor's "maximal demand" and Coakley's definition of asceticism, introduced in chapter two, should be used as guidelines for all future applications of Jewish ascetic ideals to other *mitzvot*. These theologians have done everyone a service by demarcating where danger lies in this discourse. The future of Jewish theological reflection on ascetic ideals could advance rapidly in wisdom were we to heed their warnings and follow their guidance.

The communal need for theological and ascetic reflection on *halakhic* life as "a way," not an end in itself, shows that my recovery of Salanter's description of the ascetic ideal as wholehearted divine service has applicability beyond a discussion of liturgical prayer. A life of wholeheartedness, *shlemut* in God's service, is presented by Salanter as the goal of a whole Jewish life, not just the goal of *tefilat keva*. The psalmist begs, "Create in me a clean heart O God."<sup>18</sup> And Deuteronomy is full of injunctions to wholeheartedness in God's service: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart"<sup>19</sup>; "Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and stiffen your necks no more"<sup>20</sup>; "And now, Oh Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only this, to revere the Lord your god, to walk in his ways, to love and serve Him with all your heart and soul, keeping His commandments and

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<sup>18</sup> Ps. 51:12.

<sup>19</sup> Deut. 6:5.

<sup>20</sup> Deut. 10:16.

laws..."<sup>21</sup> A new Jewish asceticism as outlined in this dissertation offers a way forward for bridging the gap between these biblical descriptions of the ideal of wholeheartedness and the minutely detailed *halakhic* practices that frame a traditional Jewish life. It is through recovering the value of academic theology, making room for asceticism, and by accepting that Judaism today can do a better job talking about itself if it learns from how Christians are talking about their own faith in our time, that Judaism will be equipped to face some of its most pressing contemporary challenges.

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<sup>21</sup> Deut. 10:12-13.

## 7.0 GLOSSARY

***adam hashalem*** – “The whole man” is someone who not only knows and acknowledges the validity of God’s commandments, but is also a person able to live in accordance with those commands because his deep emotional drives and patterns of behavior do not undermine his conscious cognitive commitments.

***aleinu*** – Part of the conclusion of every daily service, beginning in the 1100s, it migrated there from its original place as part of the Rosh Hashana New Year Liturgy. It describes a vision of a world to come in which all people come to worship and serve God.

***amida*** – A central part of every prayer service. It appears during the weekdays as a collection of nineteen blessings, recited standing.

***birkhot hashahar*** – originally, a sequence of blessings meant to accompany a person as they wake, dress, leave the house, etc., in the morning. Over time, it became part of communal prayer and numerous other texts accumulated around this earlier core. The phrase is used to name this whole series of texts, scriptural readings, and blessings that are part of structuring the opening moments of the day.

***halakha*** – literally means “the way to go.” Most often translated as Jewish law.

***hitpa’alut*** - a style of chanting musar texts accompanied by strong emotion and with gestures. This practice was developed by R. Israel Salanter as an aid to the formation of the virtues and the cultivation of desire.

***kibush ha’yetzter*** – subjugation of the evil/selfish inclination.

**maskilim** – Jewish intellectuals influenced by the Enlightenment and interested in greater integration of Jews into the economic, social, and cultural environment of the non-Jewish world.

**“maximal demand”** – a term created by Charles Taylor to reference a way of talking about transcendent ideals that can be pursued without purging, or denigrating, ordinary fulfillments and without bowdlerizing the human condition by imagining it as less broken than it actually is.

**mitnagdim** – traditional scholars from Lithuania and Poland who spent their time mastering Talmud and Halakhic literature.

**pesukei d'zimra**- a collection of psalms and poems of praise to God that precedes the shema in the morning prayer service.

**Sages** – also referred to as *Chazal* (the Rabbis of blessed memory), were teachers and scholars from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE through the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE whose names and teachings are recorded in sacred Jewish literature of the Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, etc.

**shema** – A collection of biblical verses recited as part of the evening and morning prayers, embedded in a series of rabbinic blessing texts.

**shlemut** – wholeheartedness, a state in which one’s intention, desire, and actions are all fully united in the service of God.

**s'khar v'onesh** – (divine) reward and punishment.

**“social-imaginary”** – A term used by Charles Taylor and James K. A. Smith to refer to how people imagine their social existence with its norms, expectations, and sense for what we value based on a vision of human flourishing, a sense for the telos of existence. It includes a shared sense of our whole predicament, how we got here, our relationship to other groups, and shared hopes for the good life.

***tamim*** – perfect, complete, whole, simple.

***tikkun ha'yetzer*** - repair of the selfish inclination.

***Torah*** – most narrowly the five first books of the Hebrew Bible, traditionally attributed to Moses. In its broadest sense, all divine revelation. Often used to refer to both the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Literature and the activity of studying them.

***yeshiva*** – a traditional Jewish educational institution for boys, focused on the study of classical Jewish literature.

***yetzer ha'ra*** – literally the evil inclination but better translated the selfish inclination.

***yetzer ha'tov*** – the good inclination.

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