The Blessings of the Jewish Prayer Book

Mary Ruth Bede

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THE BLESSINGS OF THE
JEWISH PRAYER BOOK

ONE hundred times a day the observing Jew is bound to bless God. The ancient rabbis had many ingenious ways of accounting for this rule. Rabbi Meir, for instance, used to say: "It is written: 'And now, Israel, what does the Lord, your God, ask of you?' (Deut 10:12)," interpreting this text as if it read: "And now, Israel, one hundred does the Lord, your God, ask of you." Or, as a profound legend has it, when a plague came upon the people as a punishment for David's sin (2 Kg 24:10–15) and one hundred youths a day died, the king ordained one hundred blessings to be recited daily, and the Lord was appeased. But whatever the origin of the rule of one hundred—whether it is really concealed in Scripture; whether it was really established by the repentant David; or

1. Men. 43b; cf. The Babylonian Talmud, ed. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1948), Menaḥoth, pp. 263–264. When the consonants alone are written, as is usual in Hebrew, mab, "what," differs from me'ab, "one hundred," only by a single silent letter. An even subtler explanation of the rule of a hundred daily blessings was claimed in 2 Kg 23:1, which, according to the Hebrew, says of David that he was raised on high, "on high" in Hebrew being 'al. Now, an ancient rabbinical commentary reads instead: "'al was established," and then goes on to link 'al with "one hundred" by the methods of gematria. This word (derived, most likely, from the same Greek source as is our English word "geometry") refers to the rabbis' exegetical numerology, that is, their attempts to uncover concealed meanings in Scripture by manipulating the arithmetical values of the Hebrew letters. For, as do a good many languages, Hebrew traditionally employs the alphabet in lieu of numerals. The first nine letters provide for 1 through 9, and the next nine for 10 through 99; the remaining four letters, together with the "final forms" of those five letters which change their shape at the end of a word, stand for 100 through 900. In our example of 'al, for instance, the letter 'ayin represents 70 and the letter lamed 30. Consequently, the rabbis considered "one hundred was established" to be a hidden sense of 2 Kg 23:1, and the rule of one hundred daily blessings was thus thought of as confirmed in Scripture (Num. R. 18:21; cf. Midraḥ Rabbah, ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon, London: Soncino, 1939, VI, 737).

whether it took its start with the men of the Great Assembly (who, it is said, instituted blessings and sanctifications for the people), and then grew to the present number in the course of generations of Jewish piety—in any case, by the second century after Christ the rule was already fixed, and to this day it remains one of the most characteristic and beautiful features of orthodox Jewish life.

*Baruk attab Adonay Elohehu Melek ha-‘olam,* “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe.” So each benediction, each *berakha,* begins. What is the meaning of *baruk attab,* “blessed art thou”? For it must be kept in mind that these benedictions are not the blessings God bestows on man nor the blessings our love begs from Him for our fellow men. Indeed, some prayer books avoid the word “blessed” and render *baruk attab* as “praised be thou.” But this is no more than side-stepping the question, since there are other verbs in Hebrew much closer to our English “praise.” An appealing, though unconvincing, etymology would like to link *baruk* to *berakha,* “a pool of water,” so that *baruk attab* would suggest that God is the pool of living waters in the midst of life’s desert. It may be that the prayer book’s use of *baruk* has no explanation in the science of words. But it does show something of the bent of the Jewish mind, for which “to bless” a thing and “to give thanks” to God for it are synonymous. “In Jewish practice one only blessed a thing *by* giving thanks to God for it before using it.” Similarly, in a way, God is called blessed because He is thanked. Not least among the gifts from the Giver of all good things are a mind and a heart that can be thankful. Hence to thank and bless Him is Israel’s duty, teaches the Jewish Morning Service:

> It is . . . our duty to thank, praise and glorify thee, to bless, to sanctify and to offer praise and thanksgiving unto thy name. Happy are we!

3. In the middle of the fifth century B.C., after the return to Jerusalem from the Babylonian Captivity, the leaders of the Jews, under Ezra and Nehemiah, pledged themselves anew to observe the Torah (Neh 9:38). This body of men is known as the Great Assembly. See Ber. 33a; cf. B. Talmud, Soncino ed., Berekhoth, p. 205.

4. Gen. R. 39:11; cf. Midrash Rabbah, Soncino ed., I, 322. A more exact etymology relates *baruk* to *borak,* “to fall on one’s knees, to kneel, to worship”—interesting when one remembers that kneeling at prayer is rare indeed among contemporary Jews, but was a frequent posture of the Jewish worshipper in times past (see, for example, Ber. 34b; cf. B. Talmud, Soncino ed., Berakhoth, pp. 213–214). Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger, in “Baruch,” Judaism, V, 2 (Spring 1956), pp. 167–168, gives an account of the deep devotional meaning of *baruk.*

how goodly is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage.

**THE EIGHTEEN BENEDICTIONS**

Of all the benedictions which grace the *Siddur*, the Jewish prayer book, the most solemn and elaborate are the "Eighteen," the *Shemoneh 'Esreh*, recited in the Morning, Afternoon, and Evening Services. Known also as the *Tefillah*, simply the prayer, it is prayed standing, which gives it yet another name, the *'Amidah*. When prayed congregationally, it is first said by each in silence and then aloud by one for all. On a weekday morning, when it is at its most typical, it opens with three blessings of praise, continues with twelve blessings which petition, and closes with three blessings of thanksgiving.

The very first of the Eighteen Benedictions acclaims God as the God of history:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great, mighty and revered God, the most high God, who bestowest loving-kindnesses, and art Master of all things; who rememberest the pious deeds of the patriarchs, and in love wilt bring a redeemer to their children’s children, for thy name’s sake.

The second benediction, of the God of nature, of the God who supports, heals, and frees, makes a profound transition from adoring Him as the One who "causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall" to adoring Him

7. The sacrifices of the Temple being no more, the ancient rabbis teach that the "Eighteen" take the place of the daily sacrifices, morning, afternoon, and evening. They stress, however, that fixed though the hours of prayer are, "if a man makes his prayers a fixed task, it is not a [genuine] supplication," for prayer ought not to be like a heavy burden. Interesting is the thought of Rabbi Eleazar, who laments that since the day the Temple was destroyed, an iron wall has come between Israel and its Father in heaven and the gates of prayer have been closed; but he adds that what are still open are the gates of weeping (Ber. 26b, 28b, 29b, 32b; cf. *B. Talmud*, Soncino ed., *Berakoth*, pp. 160, 174, 179-180, 199-200).
8. These twelve are really thirteen because of the added prayer discussed in note 10.
as the One who “causes salvation to spring forth” and who “revives the dead.” In the third, Israel's praise is joined and likened to that of the seraphim who, with their threefold “Holy,” hallow God's name in gladness and awe.

The intermediate benedictions, begging God's favors, are divided into prayers for individual well-being and prayers for the whole people of Israel. Since the life of goodness requires understanding, they begin by imploring “the gracious Giver of knowledge” for spiritual insight. As the soul needs wisdom, so too it stands in need of repentance and God's forgiveness. For what is the soul without tešhūbah, the turning from its crooked way to the straight, from sin to the fear of God; and without selīḥah, God's pardon, which crowns repentance? Hence the next two benedictions:

Cause us to return, O our Father, unto thy Torah; draw us near, O our King, unto thy service, and bring us back in perfect repentance unto thy presence. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who delightest in repentance.

Forgive us, O our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us, O our King, for we have transgressed; for thou dost pardon and forgive. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who art gracious, and dost abundantly forgive.

Only having prayed thus does the Jewish worshipper venture to ask for earthly blessings: for deliverance from affliction, for healing and recovery from illness, for rescue from want. “Give a blessing upon the face of the earth,” this, the ninth of the benedictions, closes: “O satisfy us with thy goodness, and bless our year like other good years. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who blessest the years.”

The petitions that follow, those for the people as a whole, are for the ingathering of the exiles; for the restoration of justice, the restoration of the social order Israel knew of old; for the punishment of slanderers; 10

10. This prayer “against slanderers” (the twelfth benediction), seems to have been inserted into the Eighteen Benedictions after the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus, thus making them in reality nineteen. It was, at the beginning, clearly directed against Jewish Christians, and it is perhaps important to note that it was not introduced without opposition. Since that time, it has undergone many modifications and has acquired a more general character. In its most widely used form today, it reads, in Rabbi Hertz's translation: “And for slanderers let there be no hope, and let all wickedness perish as in a moment; let all thine enemies be speedily cut off, and the dominion of arrogance do thou uproot and crush, cast down and humble speedily in our days. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who breakest the enemies and humblest the arrogant” (op. cit., pp. 143–145). Particularly
for God’s tender mercies toward His faithful; for the rebuilding of Jerusalem as an everlasting city; and for the coming of the King-Messiah, the offspring of David. Then there is the last of the intermediate petitions, utterly convinced that God listens and hears, for He knows the heart He made.

From thy presence, O our King, turn us not empty away; for thou hearkenest in mercy to the prayer of thy people Israel. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hearkenest unto prayer.

The three closing benedictions are called thanksgivings although only the middle one is explicitly of gratitude, the first pleading again for the return to Zion and the last for God’s peace on Israel. The middle of the three, a veritable anthem, acknowledges God’s mercies:

We give thanks unto thee, for thou art the Lord our God and the God of our fathers forever and ever; thou art the Rock of our lives, the Shield of our salvation through every generation. We will give thanks unto thee and declare thy praise for our lives which are committed unto thy hand, and for our souls which are in thy charge, and for thy miracles, which are daily with us, and for thy wonders and thy benefits, which are wrought at all times, evening, morn and noon . . .

While the reader who speaks in the name of all prays these words aloud, the congregation recites in an undertone a similar prayer, whose closing words beautifully express the spirit of this and of all the blessings of the prayer book. “Blessed be the God to whom thanksgivings are due,” all the worshippers say, or, in another translation, which gives God a lovely and unexpected name: “Blessed be the God of thanks.”

its opening words are, to put it mildly, harsh to the ear. Still, it is only fair to record Rabbi Hertz’s emphatic statement that the prayer calls not for the wicked to perish but for wickedness, and that in it modern Jews do not utter an imprecation against those of another faith (ibid., pp. 143-145, 588). It may be fruitful to compare with the Jewish prayer “against slanderers” the Church’s collect from the Mass for Protection Against the Heathens: “Almighty, everlasting God, in whose hand are the powers and the rights of all kingdoms: look to the help of Christians, that the heathen nations, who trust in their own fierceness, may be crushed by the power of thy right arm.”

11. “The character of this group of Berachoth is not disturbed by the inclusion of these requests,” Rabbi Elie Munk feels, quoting Rabbi Zilkiah ben Abraham ha-Rofe, “the Physician”: “The greatest homage paid to God is when the entire nation turns to Him for help.” See his The World of Prayer, trans. H. Biberfeld and L. Oschry (New York: Philipp Feldheim, 1954), p. 149.

The Duties of the Day

There are still other blessings that are part of the sacred services in the synagogue. No act of piety is sufficient to itself; indeed, precisely those actions which bring the Jewish worshipper nearest to God demand most imperatively that he praise the One who lets such marvels be. Hence the study or reading of Scripture, the performance of any of the works of the Law, call especially for a blessing of God:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast hallowed us by thy commandments, and commanded us to occupy ourselves with the words of the Torah.¹³

Nor does one step aside after reading from Scripture as if one had not been in close audience with the Almighty:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast given us the Torah of truth, and hast planted everlasting life in our midst.¹⁴

If the Scripture read is from the prophets, special thanks is offered beforehand to Him “who has chosen good prophets, and has found pleasure in their words which were spoken in truth.” When the reading is over, He is thanked again:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Rock of all worlds, righteous through all generations, O faithful God, who sayest and doest, who speakest and fulfilllest, all whose words are truth and righteousness. Faithful art thou, O Lord our God, and faithful are thy words, and not one of thy words shall return void. . .¹⁵

No feast of the Jewish calendar arrives but is greeted as coming from Him “who has kept us in life, and has preserved us, and enabled us to

Commentary on the eighteenth benediction reads: “We give thanks unto thee, O Lord our God, because we are able to give thee thanks” (Soṭa 40a; cf. B. Talmud, Soncino ed., Sotah, p. 197).

¹³. The Authorised Daily Prayer Book, ed. Hertz, p. 13. Blessings following this pattern are recited on many occasions: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who has hallowed us by thy commandments, and hast given us command concerning the circumcision . . . concerning the redemption of the firstborn son . . . who commanded us to kindle the light of Chanukah, etc.” For a summary of all the blessings, together with their talmudic sources, see “Benedictions,” Jewish Encyclopedia, III, 8–12.


¹⁵. Ibid., pp. 495–497.
reach this season.” 16 And week by week, the Sabbath is ushered in with a blessing of Him “who commanded us to kindle the Sabbath light.” 17 “In love and favor thou hast given us thy holy Sabbath as an inheritance,” another blessing tells, “as a memorial of the creation . . . and in remembrance of the departure from Egypt.” 18 Not man but God’s goodness “hallows the Sabbath.” Hence a blessing at the Evening Service for Sabbaths begs: “Purify our hearts to serve thee in truth; and in thy love and favor, O Lord our God, let us inherit thy holy Sabbath. . . .” 19 Again, before Aaron’s blessing is solemnly pronounced over the people, the congregation which is to receive it is cautioned that it comes ultimately from Him “whom alone it serves in awe,” and those who pronounce it give thanks that He has commanded them “to bless His people Israel in love.” 20

The day of a pious Jew finds no occupation, religious in itself or not, unheralded by a “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe.” Just as, in the desert, the Lord commanded that His priests wash their hands before undertaking any ministry (Ex 30:19–21), so every observing Jew approaches God only with hands purified, purified by water and by prayer:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast hallowed us by thy commandments, and given us command concerning the washing of the hands.21

Engagingly, the Hebrew idiom for the washing of the hands is netilat yadayim, “lifting up the hands.” This may be derived simply from the physical act of raising the hands in order that water may be poured over them, but in all likelihood it is linked with the psalm verse which, at one time, was recited while the hands were cleansed: “Lift up your hands toward the sanctuary, and bless the Lord” (Ps 133:2).22

Then there are the blessings of the early morning, said nowadays, however, not at the appropriate moments but as a preliminary to the Morning Service in the synagogue. The first is for awakening from sleep:

16. Ibid., p. 797 and elsewhere.
17. Ibid., p. 345.
18. Ibid., p. 395.
19. Ibid., p. 383.
21. Ibid., pp. 9, 11. It should be noted that “command” in this benediction refers to a rabbinical rather than a biblical instruction.
So long as the soul is within me, I will give thanks unto thee, O Lord my God and God of my fathers, Sovereign of all works, Lord of all souls! Blessed art thou, O Lord, whorestorest souls unto the dead.\textsuperscript{23}

The wonder of restored consciousness is not casually accepted but is related to the mighty promise of the wakening of the dead. Likewise, God is blessed for the gift of sight, for strength and clothing, for firm ground under foot:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who openest the eyes of the blind.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who clothest the naked.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who settest free them that are bound.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who raisest up them that are bowed down.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who spreadest forth the earth above the waters.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who providest my every want.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast made firm the steps of man.

Thus each moment of the morning is experienced not as routine but as a new mercy: the opening of one’s eyes, dressing oneself, stretching one’s limbs, standing upright, stepping on the ground, putting on one’s shoes, setting forth to walk—things so common, so disregarded—are related to the Author of all and in Him receive a higher significance.\textsuperscript{24}

Of the blessings for the early morning—for there are still others—one group of three must be dealt with explicitly. A man is ordered to pray: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a heathen . . . who hast not made me a woman . . . who hast not made me a bondman," while a woman is simply to

\textsuperscript{23} The Authorised Daily Prayer Book, ed. Hertz, pp. 19–23, where this and the other early-morning blessings will be found.

\textsuperscript{24} Bamberger (loc. cit., p. 168) sums up the purpose of these blessings: "One who is thus made aware of the divine Reality and nearness amid his daily experiences and affairs will react not only with awe and with a sense of responsibility, but also with gratitude and thanksgiving." Rabbi Bamberger comes, therefore, to the conclusion that whatever the literal meaning of \textit{beruk attab}, discussed in the opening paragraphs of this paper, its inner meaning is: "I rejoice and am grateful because God is accessible to me."
declare: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast made me according to thy will." The three benedictions to be recited by a man hardly breathe the humble spirit of so many other of the blessings; they seem to reflect a human, rather than a divine, order of things, and modern Jews have often strenuously objected to them. ⁵ ²⁶ Orthodox rabbis, however, are at pains to defend them, claiming that here men thank God not for any privileges but for the burden of the Law, many precepts of which are not binding on women, for instance. Hence these blessings, Rabbi Munk declares, well up from "the joy in the special task allotted to [the free men of Israel]." ⁵ ²⁷ Again, in defense of these blessings many rabbis have appealed to the words of an ancient teacher: "I call heaven and earth to witness that, whether it be Jew or heathen, man or woman, free or bondman—only according to their acts does the divine Spirit rest upon them." ²⁷

The prayer a devout Jew says before sleep contains various psalm verses, verses full of confidence: "He that dwelleth in the shelter of the Most High, abideth under the shadow of the Almighty" (90:1); "I lay me down and sleep; I awake, for the Lord sustaineth me" (3:6); "Behold, He that guardeth Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (120:4); and "Into thy hand I commend my spirit; thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth" (30:6). It contains, too, a remembrance of the command: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut 6:5). But the Jewish prayer book would not deem even so loving a prayer complete were it not prefaced by a berakah:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who maketh the bands of sleep to fall upon mine eyes, and slumber upon mine eyelids. . . . O lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, for it is thou who givest light to the apple of the eye. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who givest light to the whole world in thy glory. ²⁸

Many are the opportunities the observing Jew finds and seeks throughout the day to bless his Maker, and many are the opportunities of lifting daily events into the sphere of holiness, as when, through the

²⁶ Munk, op. cit., p. 27.
²⁷ Yalkut to Judges IV, 4; cited by Munk, op. cit., p. 28, and Hertz, op. cit., p. 21.
saying of grace, "the family table becomes the family altar." To it, as to all worship, the Jew approaches only with hands washed.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth,
is the prayer before meals. But the man of thanks, always content with God's good providence, is never content with his own gratitude, so the observing Jew has a blessing for wine, for fruits that spring from the ground or grow on a tree, for foods other than bread but made from grain, and for anything to eat or drink not included in these categories:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who createst the fruit of the vine.
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who createst the fruit of the earth.
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who createst the fruit of the tree.
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who createst various kinds of food.
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, by whose word all things exist.  

Grace after meals is most elaborate, and varies in form depending on how many men over the age of thirteen are present. No selfish thanks, the grace sings God's giving unto all:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who feedest the whole world with thy goodness, with grace, with lovingkindness and tender mercy; thou givest food to all flesh, for thy lovingkindness en-

30. The Talmud declares that if two or more eat together and do not speak words of Torah, they are sitting in the company of the insolent (Ps 1:1); they are like idolators and their table is "full of filth" (Is 28:8). But when those dining together do exchange words of Torah, the Shekinah, the divine Presence, is in their midst; it is as if they had eaten at God's table (Abot III, 2, 3; cf. B. Talmud, Soncino ed., *Abot*, pp. 27–28). Since "holy conversation" at table is thus a religious duty, it is customary to recite or sing a psalm, such as: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," or "By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept," or "When the Lord brought back the captives of Zion, we were like men dreaming" (Ps 22, 136, 125).
31. For food eaten outside of mealtime, a shorter grace is provided, which sums up the longer prayer, and the Talmud tells of one Benjamin the Shepherd who, having "made a sandwich and said, Blessed be the Master of this bread," was deemed to have fulfilled his obligation of thanks (Ber. 40b; cf. B. Talmud, Soncino ed., *Berakoth*, pp. 249–250).
dureth forever. Through thy great goodness food hath never failed us: O may it not fail us forever and ever for thy great name’s sake, since thou nourishest and sustainest all beings, and doest good unto all, and providest food for all thy creatures whom thou hast created. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who givest food unto all.\(^\text{32}\)

Then thanks is given for the deliverance from Egypt, for the Covenant and the Law, and Zion and the house of David are remembered, lest material benefits loom too large. Under a series of impassioned invocations, the great Giver is praised, and begged to give again:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, O God, our Father, our King, our Mighty One, the Holy One of Jacob, our Shepherd, the Shepherd of Israel, O King, who art kind and dealest kindly with all, day by day thou hast dealt kindly, dost deal kindly, and wilt deal kindly with us; thou hast bestowed, thou dost bestow, thou wilt ever bestow benefits upon us, yielding us grace, lovingkindness, mercy and relief, deliverance and prosperity, blessing and salvation, consolation, sustenance and support, mercy, life, peace and all good: of no manner of good let us be in want.

In the concluding prayer, one of the mighty favors asked is: "May the All-merciful make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and of the life of the world to come."

One more berakah in regard to food must be mentioned, because of its signal universality. After eating herbs, eggs, or cheese, for instance, or after any drink other than wine, the devout Jew says:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who createst innumerable living beings with their wants. We thank thee for all the means that thou hast created wherewith to sustain the life of each of them. Blessed art thou who art the Life of all worlds.\(^\text{33}\)

Here animals and, though the one who prays it may not be aware of it, even plants are drawn into the orb of prayer. Are not all beings, all creatures, all realms, known and unknown, remembered when God is addressed as Hey ba’olamim, "Life of [all] worlds"?

**VARIOUS OCCASIONS**

The orthodox life is often dismissed as repressive. But is there not poetry in giving thanks to God for fragrant barks, plants, fruits, spices, and oil?


\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 989.
"Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who createst fragrant woods . . . who createst fragrant plants . . . who givest a goodly scent to fruits . . . who createst divers kinds of spices . . . who createst fragrant oil." Sights and sounds are also drawn into the sphere of religious awe. Lightning, falling stars, lofty mountains, great deserts, or the sky in splendor, remind the observing Jew of God, King of the universe, "who wrought the work of creation." Thunder, earthquake, and hurricane speak of Him "whose strength and might fill the world." Blessed too is He "who made the great sea." Beautiful persons, animals, or trees call forth a breathless thanks to the Lord "who has such as these in His world." The first blossoming of the year evokes these words:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast made thy world lacking in nought, but hast produced therein goodly creatures and goodly trees wherewith to give delight unto the children of men.

That the band of colors produced when the sun's rays are broken by prisms of water should be so gratuitously lovely does indeed show God to be the Lord of generosity and beauty. But to the devout Jew, the rainbow is a sign of the God of fidelity, "who remembers His covenant and fulfills His word."

What might be just common curiosity can become wonder, can be raised to the height of gratitude. To be in the presence of a man learned in the Torah is to bless God for "imparting of His wisdom to them that revere Him." Subtly different is the blessing on seeing a man distingished for other than sacred knowledge; here God is spoken of as the One who "has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood." The splendor of a king and his court ought not to be witnessed without praise of Him who "has given of His glory to mortals." And there is delicacy in the words said on meeting strangely formed persons, such as giants or dwarfs: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who variest the forms of thy creatures."

The gathering together of many people is to be hallowed by a "Blessed be He who knows the secret thoughts of all these." A devout Jew meets a friend after long separation with thoughts of the Reviver of the dead, and he greets a man recovered from grave illness with thanks to "the Merciful who gave thee back to us and not to the earth."

34. Ibid., pp. 989–995, for all the "Blessings on Various Occasions."
If he himself recovers from an illness or is rescued when in peril of his life, he publicly confesses:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who doest good unto the undeserving, and who hast dealt kindly with me.  

Good tidings or the sight of joy make the heart sing to the Lord "who is good and dispenses good," while sad news or the sight of illness or of a holy place in desolation prompt praise of "the true Judge." Time, all time, and particularly the landmarks of joy, need hallowing. Hence the blessing which marks the start of each festive season is used also for any new and joyous event, such as tasting any fruit for the first time in the year, entering a new house, or wearing new clothes for the first time:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast kept us in life, and hast preserved us, and hast enabled us to reach this season.

Places too are occasions for blessings. There are those offered over a spot renowned for wonders of old, over a holy place restored after long desolation, or over a place from which idolatry has been removed, hailing Him who performed miracles for the fathers, who re-establishes the border of the widow (that is, Jerusalem), and who wipes out idolatry. Moving are the words prescribed on seeing a statue of Hermes, once the most common heathen image, or any place where idolatry is practiced:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who showest long-suffering to those who transgress thy will.  

35. Ibid., p. 193. The one who wishes to fulfill his duty of thanksgiving for recovery from grave illness or for escape from the dangers of desert or sea is called forward to read a portion of the Pentateuch. Then, after the usual benediction which closes such readings, he pronounces the blessing given above, the Gomel Bensiben. The word bensiben appears also in the invitation to recite grace after meals as it was often said in Yiddish by Jews from central and east Europe: Rabosai, mir wellen bensiben, "Gentlemen, let us say grace." This affords a striking sidelight on the cultural interrelations that must have existed centuries ago between the Jewish and the Catholic communities, for bensiben clearly comes from the Latin benedicere, "to bless."

36. There are other rabbinical sayings on the habitations of heathens which have not this same spirit. Moreover, when an orthodox Jew sees a place where idolatry has been uprooted within Palestine, he is to say: "Blessed be He who uprooted idolatry from our land; and as it has been uprooted from this place, so may it be uprooted from all places belonging to Israel; and do thou turn the heart of those that serve [idols] to serve thee" (Ber. 57b; cf. B. Talmud, Soncino ed., Berakoth, p. 358). Maurice Simon, in his notes to Berakoth, identifies "those that serve them" as renegade Israelites. These "renegade Israelites" may well be Jewish Chris-
In sum, the rabbis teach that "if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a benediction, he commits sacrilege. . . . [It] is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven . . . like robbing the Holy One, blessed be He," for "the Lord's are the earth and its fullness" (Ps 23:1). 37

CONCLUSION

The hundred daily blessings have been likened to the hundred sockets of silver which once supported the sanctuary of the desert (Ex 38:27), for they support, Rabbi Munk says, the sanctuary of Jewish life. 38 True, the number "one hundred" may at times become almost an end in itself. Such a temptation is the orthodox Jew's as it is every religious man's; indeed, all men, in all too many of their strivings, are inclined to forget the goal and linger with the means. Hence a hasidic rabbi taught that the Jewish worshipper is to say "Blessed," the first word of each benediction, with his whole strength, leaving no strength for the rest of the prayer. For if he is mindful of the verse: "They that wait for the Lord shall renew their strength" (Is 40:31), he will utter his "Blessed" as if to say: "Our Father in heaven, I am giving you all the strength that is within me in that very first word; now will you, in exchange, give me an abundance of new strength, so that I can go on with my prayer." 39

The biblical spirit of thanksgiving which pervades the ancient blessings of the Jewish prayer book marvelously marks the liturgical books of the Catholic Church. Such hymns of grateful joy as the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord . . . because He . . . has done great things for me . . . He has given help to Israel . . . as He spoke to our fathers" (Lk 1:46-55); the Te Deum: "We praise you, we acclaim you Lord and Master. . . . We will confess and glorify your holy name"; or the Benedictus, whose opening words are: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel" (Lk 1:68)—such hymns as these, rich in

memories of the Old Testament, are recited day after day as part of the Church's official prayer. Indeed, the heart of Catholic worship, the Eucharist, takes its very name from berakah, blessing and thanksgiving.

More than the name, "the pattern of the Christian Eucharist, not only as a whole but in all its organic details, developed from the pattern of the Jewish eucharist." 40 The telling, for instance, in grace after meals, of God's mighty acts of deliverance has its counterpart and climax in the Eucharistic Prayer of all Catholic Liturgies, as in the Preface of the Roman Rite. And the berakah over bread, the berakah over the cup, have become the glorious consecration of bread and wine. Hence it might be said that, as thanksgiving binds together the Old Dispensation and the New, so, however much separates them, the two voices of prayer, the Christian and the Jewish, are still kindred voices because of their giving of thanks.