

## Developing a Language for Jewish Liturgical Asceticism: Wholeness of Heart as a Telos of Traditional Jewish Prayer

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*In this paper I examine the role of prayer in the formation of human desire by applying the teachings of Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the modern Musar movement, to Jewish liturgical prayer. Inspired by the philosophical and theological argument for the power of liturgy in desire formation recently articulated by the Presbyterian theologian James K. A. Smith in *Desiring the Kingdom*, this paper recovers a Jewish discourse of desire formation through Torah study used by Salanter and applies it in a new way to a practitioners' habitual engagement with Jewish liturgy. By approaching prayer as a spiritual practice, which changes the capacities of its practitioners to live toward a particular vision of fullness and human flourishing, and by drawing out the role of imagination, story and embodiment in the theological anthropology of Rabbi Israel Salanter, I argue for the centrality of desire formation as a key purpose of liturgical prayer.*

*Keywords: liturgical theology, Musar, asceticism, anthropology, liturgical prayer, desire formation*

In Saba Mahmood's preface to the 2012 edition of *The Politics of Piety*, she laments that the reception of her book has most often focused on questions of agency rather than on the way that our conceptual understandings of a practice shape the formation of subjects.<sup>1</sup> This paper takes up an aspect of that task by offering a new frame for understanding Jewish liturgical practice. Inspired by the recent book by the Reformed Protestant James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, and drawing on the theological anthropology of Rabbi Israel Salanter, this paper offers a new way of thinking and talking about *tefilat keva*<sup>2</sup> (תפילת קבע) (fixed prayer) as an ascetic practice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), xii.

<sup>2</sup> I am proposing to use this Hebrew construct תפילת קבע (*tefilat keva*) to refer to the habitual performance of a fixed prayer text at a fixed time. In doing so I am expanding the meaning of these words while drawing on their resonance in Jewish legal sources. In a context in which the discussion is about the timing of one's prayer obligation, the word *keva* can mean 'fixed' or 'required at a certain time.' See, for example, *Mishnah Brachot* 4:1, *TB Brachot* 27b:13. In other contexts, *keva* can mean 'automatic' or 'rote,' as opposed to an intentional plea for mercy; see *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 2:13. *Tefilat keva* is regular habitual prayer at set times with a sense of it being so familiar that it could be said automatically, without deep intentionality behind every word. But I want to be clear that I am not using this phrase to talk about the experience of prayer said in a language that a person does not understand and that is said with no intention or devotion of any kind. That kind of prayer is not prayer. What I am trying to pick out is the way that praying a liturgy is an experience that can shift along a spectrum of concentration and devotion to one of repetition that washes over a person. I am suggesting that we use *tefilat keva* to talk about the performance of liturgical prayer that one has done regularly and will do again, an action that has habituated a person, forming the subconscious "social imaginary."

<sup>3</sup> A key part of Smith's argument is that Christian liturgy is not merely forming a person's religious ideas but seeking to orient the desires of a person such that they will live differently in all aspects of their life (*Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Culture Formation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009], 173). Sarah Coakley defines ascetic formation as "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'" (*The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* [London, Bloomsbury, 2015], 18). I use the term ascetic in this sense, recognizing that ascetic formation includes but is not limited to desire formation.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith links liturgical prayer to the formation of a Christian “social imaginary” and the subconscious formation of human desire.<sup>4</sup> This paper uses Smith’s argument as a model for building a Jewish account of liturgy as a desire-forming activity. My reflection on liturgy is grounded in a commitment to liturgy as a locus for the production of the faith of a community, as a means to the creation of a community that rightly prays the liturgy.<sup>5</sup> This essay is a work of constructive theology within the field of comparative theology.<sup>6</sup> I am not

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<sup>4</sup> This is a term popularized in theological circles by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). It is defined as “the way that we collectively imagine, even pre-theoretically, our social life in western society” (142). It is a way of speaking about the pre-conscious expectations shared by large groups of people about how they fit into the world with others such that they share enough common understanding to participate in common practices. This imaginary “is carried by images, stories, legends, etc.” (172). Smith looks for the ways that liturgy shapes a Christian social imaginary through images and story and expands to consider bodily action as well, all with an eye to the way that the human social imaginary orients people toward certain goals or ends worth living for, loving, and/or desiring. See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to liturgical theology see David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?* 2nd ed. (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 3–4. This paper engages liturgical theology in the tradition of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, Fr. Aiden Kavanagh, and David Fagerberg, who argue that it is the root of theology and not merely a branch of aesthetics nor of history, nor a branch of ritual studies (see David Fagerberg, “A Century of Liturgical Asceticism,” *Diakonia* 31, no. 1 [1998]). In *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013) Fagerberg shows the central role of the body in the healing of the soul based on a study of Orthodox ascetical traditions. He also pointedly differentiates this field from ritual studies by placing it at the nexus point of a conversation influenced by three streams: theology, liturgy, and asceticism. “Liturgy without asceticism and theology is a species of ritual studies; asceticism without liturgy and theology is athletic or philosophical training; theology without liturgy and asceticism is an academic discipline in higher education” (10). This approach of noticing that practice both produces and is produced by belief shares commitments with George Lindbeck’s cultural linguistic frame (*The Nature of Doctrine* [Philadelphia, Westminster John Knox Press, 1984], 35).

<sup>6</sup> This paper is an example of the kind of recovery and appropriation work that can be accomplished by comparative theologians. Catherine Cornille gives the title ‘recovery’ to the way that the study of another religion acts as a catalyst for a theologian to grasp afresh a neglected or marginalized part of their own religious tradition. In this case the theological anthropology of Salanter and his teachings on *hitpa’alut* (a Torah chanting practice) have drawn little attention among contemporary liturgical theologians. By engaging with Christian theologians who were asking questions about desire formation, I was inspired to look within the Jewish tradition and recover Salanter’s model of desire formation. ‘Appropriation,’ as Cornille describes it, is the act of learning a new element from one tradition that is brought home to another to enhance an underdeveloped or undeveloped idea. For an introduction to the methods and purposes of comparative theology see Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019, reviewed elsewhere in this issue). In the case of this project, the underdeveloped idea is reflecting on liturgy as a form of asceticism. Within the field of Jewish liturgy, I know of no engagement with classical Jewish theological anthropology. Ruth Langer’s recent comprehensive bibliography of academic research on Jewish liturgy in English demonstrates the fact that this is a missing element in current scholarly analysis (see *Jewish Theology: A Guide to Research* [New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015]). Much Jewish liturgical scholarship asks historical questions and uses the tools of that discipline to proceed in its analysis. Lawrence Hoffman’s work is a notable exception; he pays attention to the sociocultural contexts within which prayer rituals are embodied and draws on ritual studies theory in his analysis of the meaning of prayers. But his work deals little with personal formation. Langer, while mostly using historical tools of analysis, does not ignore the theological import of liturgical acts when there is clear textual evidence for particular theological motifs in the liturgy and in Rabbinic teachings about prayer. But her work does not grapple with the ascetic/formative dimension of prayer on the person praying in any comprehensive way. There is a single essay by Jack Bieler in which he examines elements of the liturgy and the synagogue service that are meant to cultivate an attitude of reverence, but he does not engage Jewish theological anthropology in any way (“Fear of God and Prayer,” in *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence and Fear of God*, ed. Marc D. Stern [New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2008], 185–230). Finally, there is an essay by Peter Ochs that looks at morning prayer as a form of counter socialization of the intellect in the proper use of propositional judgements. This essay could be seen as one contribution to a Jewish field of Liturgical Asceticism, but it seems a bit ridiculous to suggest that one essay can make a “field” (see Peter Ochs, “Morning Prayer as Redemptive Thinking,” in *Liturgy, Time and the Politics of Redemption*, ed. Randi Rashkover and C.

claiming that I have data that says that liturgical prayer is accomplishing desire formation. Instead, I'm saying that we could authentically come to understand Jewish prayer in this way. If we begin to think differently, we will begin to pray differently.

My argument proceeds by first introducing Salanter's theological anthropology so that I can use his concepts to give an account of human desire from a rooted Jewish perspective. Next, I introduce the "social imaginary" and explain how it is applied to liturgy by James K. A. Smith. Finally, I bring together Smith and Salanter's conceptions of desire formation to demonstrate the ascetic desire forming quality of habitual liturgical prayer.

### **Israel Salanter's Vision for Human Flourishing**

Rabbi Israel Salanter was the nineteenth-century Lithuanian Orthodox Jewish founder of what is known today as the Musar Movement, an educational endeavor focused on ethical formation.<sup>7</sup> Salanter's writings offer an early modern take on the human condition, refracted through traditional Jewish sources. He also developed unique pedagogical methods for training human desire.<sup>8</sup>

Salanter saw the biblical Abraham as the paragon of ascetical transformation, the ideal for which all should strive. Letter 30 in the collection of letters by Salanter published as *Or Yisrael*, or Light of Israel, begins with the admonition, "Do not say the Almighty made me this way, thus I am who I am."<sup>9</sup> It continues, "The entire purpose of man's [sic] existence is to purge every negative trait and character attribute from his heart."<sup>10</sup> What does purgation accomplish? Salanter tells us that it makes us like our father Abraham, who walked before God in perfection.<sup>11</sup> According to Salanter's reading Abraham was perfect, a whole man (*ish shalem*), because his character had become fully transformed. He lived with complete wholeness of heart.<sup>12</sup> Such attainment of wholeness, or *shleimut*, is, per Salanter, the overarching goal of a Jewish life.

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C. Pecknold [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006], 50–90. Because the questions of liturgical asceticism are not being grappled with by contemporary scholars of Jewish liturgy in the USA, it was the example of this conversation happening among Christian theologians that prompted me to look for a way to engage the question of Jewish liturgy as a source of desire formation.

<sup>7</sup> For a then-comprehensive bibliography of the literature on the Musar movement, see Hillel Goldberg, *Israel Salanter: Text, Structure, Idea* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 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 Musar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to these practices see Moshe J. Gerstel, "The Musar Practices of Rabbi Israel Salanter," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 17 (2016–17).

<sup>9</sup> Israel Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael: The Classic Writings of Rav Yisrael Salanter and his disciple Rav Yitzchak Blazer*, ed. Eli Linas, trans. Zvi Miller (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 2004), 307.

<sup>10</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, 308.

<sup>11</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, 309. Salanter links this idea of Abraham as a perfected human being with a discussion in the Talmud *B. Shabbat* 30b of *adam hashalem* (a whole person). The context is a conversation about why Ecclesiastes was accepted as a canonical text. One of the reasons given is that it concludes with the admonition to "fear God, and keep His mitzvot, for this is the whole man." (Ecclesiastes 12:13). This "whole man" is *adam hashalem*. A number of sages are said to have taught that the whole world was created for the sake of just such a human being.

<sup>12</sup> Israel Salanter's teaching that wholeness of heart was the major distinguishing characteristic of Abraham can be contrasted with a number of classical Midrashic Jewish sources which praise Abraham for other capacities. He is credited with great intellectual insight because of his recognition that the idols in his father's shop were not really gods in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13. He is also credited with asking the right questions about the nature of fundamental reality in *Genesis Rabbah* 39:1.

Salanter inherited the metaphor of the inner life as a battleground, the human heart in conflict, from the classical rabbinic tradition.<sup>13</sup> The inner life of a human is a conflict zone for the actions, intentions, and desires of each person. Each Jew is called to serve God with a whole heart (*lev shalem*) by living a devoted and ethical life framed by the regular practice of *mitzvot*.<sup>14</sup> But this ideal of *shlemut* is not just about perfected action in the world; it includes the notion that right action is accomplished with perfect intention and devotion.<sup>15</sup> However, for most people, their experience of life is of division, not wholeness. According to classical Jewish anthropology each of us is drawn toward sin by the *yetzer ha'ra*, a rationalizing force that justifies selfish behavior and rebellion against God's commandments.<sup>16</sup> Often translated the evil or bad inclination, this force within us is probably best understood as our selfish inclination.<sup>17</sup> The *yetzer ha'tov*, the “good inclination,” is tasked with subjugating this selfish drive, overpowering it and directing human action toward behaviors that align with our *telos*, what is truly good for us. This battle is the source of internal division.

### The Path to Wholeness

Salanter taught two approaches to dealing with this internal conflict, but only one of them leads to wholeness. The first, subjugation,<sup>18</sup> means 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. A person can cultivate a habit of regularly bringing to mind the consequences of various actions, considering how God would judge them, and choose to act in accordance with the good. The spiritual path to accomplish this kind of subjugation is the study of *halakha*,<sup>19</sup> *musar* (ethical literature), and the regular performance of morally upright behavior.<sup>20</sup> This is the service

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<sup>13</sup> Ishai Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: "Yetzer Hara" and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) is an excellent recent introduction to the rabbinic concept of the *yetzer ha'ra*. 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. Also see Jonathan Wyn-Schofer, *The Making of A Sage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 98–101.

<sup>14</sup> Acts of holiness that are an enactment of God's commandments. These commandments touch on how a person ought to relate to God and to their fellow human beings.

<sup>15</sup> Wholeness (*shlemut*) is portrayed as an ideal in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*. In that text Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus are depicted as having overcome the inner division between the good and bad yetzer. For a helpful treatment of these sources see Wyn-Schofer, *The Making of a Sage*, 106ff.

<sup>16</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, 321.

<sup>17</sup> If we use the words 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 Talmud Bavli *Yoma* 69a. The *yetzer ha'ra* is also called “very good” according to *Genesis Rabbah* 9:7 on Genesis 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 selfishness is important to human flourishing, but it is also easily a trap and a source of great evil in human action.

<sup>18</sup> In Hebrew he uses the term *kibush ha-yetzer*.

<sup>19</sup> I hesitate to translate *halakha* as Jewish law. It means ‘the way to walk,’ and refers to a large body of literature that describes how Jews are called to faithfully 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 how Jews can infuse the majority of their human activity with the remembrance of God.

<sup>20</sup> Salanter, “Igeres HaMussar,” in *Ohr Yisrael*, 402.

of God with the *yetzer ha'tov*, the good inclination. “When a person is in the state of subjugating his base traits and the desires of his spirit—which is accomplished by employing the overpowering force of the intellect—he is called ‘one who serves *Hashem* (God) with his *yetzer tov*,’ i.e. with his intellect.”<sup>21</sup>

However, even if we could train ourselves to think about everything we do before we act, we still will not have accomplished the ideal of *shlemut*. 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 rectified and not just controlled.

When [a person] is in the state of rectifying his character traits and the desires of his spirit, to the point where he wishes solely to fulfill the Divine will, he is called ‘one who serves Hashem with his *yetzer ha'ra* [selfish inclination]’. . . This person . . . rectifies them, sweetening their bitterness and transforming them to good. This then is the meaning of ‘to serve Hashem with both inclinations—the *yetzer ha'tov* and the *yetzer ha'ra*.’<sup>22</sup>

Rectified character is the experience of all our internal forces being attracted to ethical righteous behavior, drawn to love and serve God. A person like this is said to serve God with both the *yetzer ha'ra* and *yetzer ha'tov*.<sup>23</sup> He has rectified 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>24</sup>

Rectification of the selfish inclination requires working on the submerged and opaque aspect of the self. Salanter called this aspect *ta'avah*, the part of us that has a natural desire for pleasure. This is the aspect of our self that determines most of our routine behaviors and spontaneous activities. For Salanter the *yetzer ha'ra* and the *yetzer ha'tov* are both intellectual forces.<sup>25</sup> One is the voice that rationalizes selfishness and the violation of God’s law; the other is the reasonable voice that reminds us of our duties to God and others and is strengthened by studying Torah. Both of these are conscious elements of the self. Studying Torah, and especially *halakha*,

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<sup>21</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, 321.

<sup>22</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, 320.

<sup>23</sup> Salanter’s description of wholeness of heart presumes that the goals of such a person are necessarily framed by the goods defined by Torah: the love and service of God and righteous living with regard to others. Of course, this is not a necessary assumption. A person could be wholehearted in love of evil. The quality of wholeheartedness is a structural characteristic of integrity; the object of love is not determined by having the quality. See Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 98–100, for a more in-depth account of this distinction.

<sup>24</sup> Salanter’s contribution to this ideal of formation is not in the content of what a good life looks like. He relies on the vision of the ideal Jew as a servant of God, doing mitzvot and demonstrating ideal character traits as described in classical Jewish works of ethical literature. What Salanter offers is a method for shaping the self through the cultivation of desire that leads to wholeness of heart. See Wyn-Shofer, *The Making of A Sage*, for a fuller outline of this rabbinic ideal.

<sup>25</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 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 argument that are based, upon *halakhah*” (*Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 98).

can help the *yetzer ha'tov* fight back against desires to act in sinful ways. This is the work accomplished by subjugation. But this is not the sweetening of the selfish inclination described above. To accomplish wholeness, there has to be some way to bridge the gap between cognitive knowledge and subconscious motivation.<sup>26</sup>

*Ta'avah*, desire, is reached through using our intellect to clarify our comprehension, and our imagination and emotions to leave an impression on the subconscious. In his seminal work *Igeret haMussar*, Salanter taught that every action, thought, and feeling makes an impression on the *ta'avah*. As these impressions accumulate through repetition and through their intensity, they amass onto a person's inner heart.<sup>27</sup> He likens the practice to water dripping onto stone for days and years on end. Eventually the stone is worn away, even though the first drop and many thousands thereafter had no perceptible effect.<sup>28</sup> “So it is with ‘pouring’ *Hazal's* [the early Rabbinic Sage] words upon a heart of stone: if a person delves intensively into them, they will eventually penetrate his heart.”<sup>29</sup> These subconscious impressions rectify the *ta'avah*, sifting the natural orientation of desire away from selfish ends toward the goods of Torah.<sup>30</sup> The lifelong work of ethical self-education is never totally complete; one must always be ready to resist wayward desires since our imagination can easily be triggered and tempt us back toward sin, but one can also be hopeful that guided change of our inclinations is possible. Salanter's understanding of rectification opens up the possibility that *ta'avah* can be trained to long for God, to desire what God desires, gutting the antinomian voice of the motivation to make arguments for selfish or lazy behaviors.

### How is this rectification accomplished?

Salanter taught a special meditation practice called *hitpa'alut*, a method of repetitive emotional engagement with Jewish ethical literature as a spiritual practice for rectification.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “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” (Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 100).

<sup>27</sup> Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 207–8.

<sup>28</sup> Etkes speculates that Salanter got this idea of accumulated impressions from the *Sefer Heshbon Ha Nefesh* by Rabbi Menahem Mendel Lefin. This is the idea that every act and every feeling leaves an impression on a person's soul (*Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 207).

<sup>29</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Israel*, 335.

<sup>30</sup> In letter six of *Igeret Ha'Musar*, Salanter calls these subconscious impressions positive “dark forces” that aid in “the battle against rampant desire” (*Ohr Yisrael*, 181). I see two possible readings of Salanter's understanding of formation of the subconscious. The first would suggest that *ta'avah* is conquered or displaced by another positive force. The problem with this option is that it would make little sense to say that a person serves God with his *yetzer ha'ra*. Rather, if this were what Salanter meant, it would make more sense to say the person had conquered the *yetzer ha'ra* completely and now is only motivated by a positive subconscious element that Salanter never named. This first option seems particularly problematic to me because it negates the very distinction Salanter introduces between subjugation (*kibush ha'yetzer*) and rectification (*tikkun ha'yetzer*). I think it makes more sense to understand *ta'avah* as internal deep desire that is oriented toward selfishness in its natural state. But it can be transformed, rectified, and shifted away from selfishness and toward a longing for Godly purposes. When Salanter says a person of wholeness (*shlemut*) serves God with their *yetzer ha'ra*, he means that at the deepest part of their *yetzer ha'ra* the desire for God has reformed their *ta'avah*.

<sup>31</sup> This ethical literature is known as *musar* literature, literature about ethical and spiritual discipline. The intellectual study of *musar* texts was already an accepted practice in Salanter's day. Salanter's contribution is the method of study using the technique of *hitpa'alut* (Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 102). Bahya Ibn Pakuda's *The Duties of the Heart* (c. 1080) is described as the first *musar* text because it is the first systematic treatment of Jewish ethics. He wrote it at a time when compendiums of Jewish law were developed for the first time. These legal texts extract Jewish legal thinking from their context within the Talmud, separating these legal discourses from ethically inclined narrative stories. The rulings were reorganized and compiled to be more easily referenced by legal scholars. Bahya was concerned that the cultivation of

*Hitpa'alut* is a form of verbal meditation engaging one's imagination and emotion. The practice includes emotionally potent singing and chanting ethical texts in a room with others. It was "performed aloud, the power of the voice, the special melody, and the rhythm all serving to arouse the emotions . . . the melody characterized by sadness and broken-heartedness, mingled with groans and at times even with outbursts of tears."<sup>32</sup> The practitioner intensively focuses the imagination on a single virtue, trying to feel its significance.<sup>33</sup> "[T]he technique of *hitpa'alut* is to focus all of one's energy on the particular emotion . . . until all other feelings are temporarily forgotten and extinguished."<sup>34</sup> An account of this practice is given in Chaim Grade's Yiddish novel *The Yeshiva*. The book's main character is Tzemach Atlas, a young man drawn to study at the famous yeshiva of Rav Yosef Horowitz in Novhardok.

Tzemach Atlas was a young Torah student in Lomzhe when he heard that in the Mussar 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>35</sup>

Salanter would object to the metaphor of death applied to the selfish inclination, but the description of shouting, pounding, lingering, and self-examination all fit the practice.<sup>36</sup>

The other component of this practice requires tapping into the imagination. "The imagination is an overflowing river" that can drown our intellect;<sup>37</sup> it can be a source of help or harm in the project of ethical formation.

Man is free in his imagination . . . His unbridled imagination draws him mischievously in the way of his heart's desire, without fear of the certain future—

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an inner life of devotion and ethical feeling was being neglected; his treatise therefore focuses 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. Bahya 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>32</sup> Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 103.

<sup>33</sup> See Gerstel, "The Musar Practices of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter," 224.

<sup>34</sup> Salanter, *Ohr Yisrael*, 332.

<sup>35</sup> Chaim Grade, *The Yeshiva*, trans. Curt Leviant (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Salanter warns his disciples to always work on both rectification and subjugation of *ta'avah*. This is because *ta'avah* never stops being a potential source of danger. A powerful external stimulus can surprise us at any moment, jolt the *ta'avah*, and if a person is not prepared to check herself, she can end up failing to stop herself. She can easily give in to the temptation to sin. Salanter gives an example of a person who at one time had learned how to conquer/subjugate his anger. This person then was able to attain to the level of rectification: he became someone who was habitually patient with everyone. This kind of person needs to still keep up the skill of controlling anger. He might stumble into a situation that surprises him and still lose control of his anger.

<sup>37</sup> Salanter, "Igert Ha'Musar," *Ohr Yisrael*, 392.

the time when Hashem will examine all of his deeds, and he will be subjected to severe judgments . . . Woe to the imagination, this evil enemy! It is in our hands to repel it . . . What can we do? Awaken the fear of God in the soul and the great dread of His punishment in our spirit.

The imagination can help us to fantasize about selfish and sinful behaviors, or it can be used in *hitpa'alut* to help a person imagine divine judgement and punishment for sinfulness. Salanter was particularly focused on the power of fear to overturn *ta'avah*. It is well known that fear is a profound source of human motivation, so it should not be surprising that Salanter sought to use its power to help us build ethical character. What is surprising to me is his lack of attention to cultivating the love and service of God. I cannot fully account for his focus on cultivating fear, but I am certain that *hitpa'alut* remains effective when the focus is on the goodness and love of God. We have accounts of a range of emotional consequences in the testimonies of Salanter's students, including regret and broken-heartedness over sin along with feelings of purification, but also feelings of awakening to a new longing for the good.<sup>38</sup>

*Hitpa'alut* drew on the ancient rabbinic practice of speaking Torah as a way of rebuking the *yetzer ha'ra*.<sup>39</sup> When a sage was feeling tempted by a particular sin, he would quote scripture passages to rebuke his inclination to sin. Salanter reconceptualized this practice to give a role to imagination and emotion in resisting sin. His teaching on rectification (*tikkun ha'yetzer*) foregrounds the central importance of desire formation, a form of asceticism, for Jewish spiritual practice. Salanter's teachings are fertile ground for enriching our understanding of what we do when we pray using Jewish liturgy.

### Israel Salanter's Teaching Applied to Liturgical Prayer

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith provides a helpful model for my purpose. Using Augustinian theological anthropology and the philosophy of Charles Taylor, Smith argues that liturgical prayer has an important role to play in Christian formation. His analysis focuses on the centrality of desire to human action and the role of story, the body, and social play in forming desire. Smith claims that humans are “intentional creatures whose fundamental way of intending the world is love or desire . . . [T]his desire—which is unconscious or non-cognitive—is always aimed at some vision of the good life.”<sup>40</sup>

Smith's understanding of desire has a wider meaning than Salanter's and can enrich how we use *ta'avah* today. Desire is not merely oriented toward short-term pleasures and away from pain. In keeping with the idea of rectification, desire is something that can be aimed by what Smith calls a “picture” of human flourishing. These pictures are made up of “assumptions about what good relationships look like, what a just economy and distribution of resources looks 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>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter*, 105. According to one practitioner, Rav Yitzchak Blazer, *hitpa'alut* was said to transform a heart of stone into a heart of flesh (*Ohr Yisrael*, 123).

<sup>39</sup> Wyn-Schofer gives an account of this technique in *The Making of A Sage*, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 63.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 53.



Smith's claim is grounded in Charles Taylor's work on the "social imaginary." The "social imaginary" is our shared conception of human flourishing as the main, subconscious driver of our daily action. It is communicated by films, plays, novels, legends, stories, by what we value with our time, effort, and money, and by what we honor. In Taylor's words, "every person, and every society, lives with or by some conceptions of what human flourishing is . . . What we love, what we desire, is formed by what we imagine the good life looks like."<sup>42</sup> There is an embodied knowledge of what is worth living for that we learn subconsciously from Facebook and Instagram feeds, from the supermarket and the mall, and from television drama. By applying the "social imaginary" to *ta'avah* we can do some creative thinking about this aspect of the self within a Jewish paradigm.

We also get a greater understanding of why Salanter's *hitpa'alut* technique is effective at *ta'avah* rectification. It is a spiritual practice of regular meditation on ideal ethical behavior that places before the reader a vision of the good life. As practitioners read meditatively, with an emotionally powerful chant, they train themselves to love and long for those goods. The presence of others in the room, a central aspect of this practice, means that there is also a strong social component.

Salanter clearly understood the importance of emotion and imagination for *hitpa'alut*. The "social imaginary" helps us better understand the role of story in *ta'avah* formation. His articulation of the goal of human flourishing is framed by the story of Abraham. His teachings on the value of imagining reward and punishment for each practice, his practice of meditating on damnation, is an eschatological story. His use of these and other stories evoked emotions that drove the rectification process. But storytelling doesn't have to be that overt. The "social imaginary" is maintained in many ways that are not all that obvious. Our desires are formed at such a subtle level that there is no need for our personal assent or active involvement. What we could not have known from studying Salanter alone is this power of narrative at the subconscious level, even when we aren't necessarily paying close attention. The "social imaginary" helps us to notice this additional aspect. *Ta'avah* rectification is aided or impeded by more than just *hitpa'alut*. *Ta'avah* is impacted by embodied imaginative engagement with meaningful stories, by the subconscious signals we get from our social world about the goods worthy of love. I want to reframe our understanding of *tefilat keva* by noticing how it is one of these mechanisms for *ta'avah* formation.

### **Liturgical Prayer as an Ascetic Spiritual Practice**

My contention is that normative Jewish prayer is, at its very heart, an ascetic spiritual practice, one that forms our human desires.<sup>43</sup> *Tefilat keva*—fixed daily prayer—is a spiritual practice that supports the positive formation of *ta'avah*. In making this claim I'm suggesting that Salanter's goal of *ta'avah* rectification can be accomplished with a different form of Jewish literature, namely liturgy, and not just with musar texts.

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<sup>42</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> I am not the first to notice the role of prayer in the formation of our aspirations. Abraham Joshua Heschel briefly makes a similar claim: "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: 'Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile; and in the face of those who curse me, let my soul be silent'" (*Man's Quest for God* [New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1954], 7).

How does regular participation in normative liturgical prayer shape desire? *Tefilat keva* is a social, embodied, and storied activity. It engages the imagination of the people praying, inviting them to see their lives as part of a larger story and to long for the goods of that story. The very act of prayer itself is a *mitzvah*, the embodiment of a divine commandment. It is a participation in the covenantal Jewish story of God and Israel. In rabbinic discourse *avodah*, the service of God, became another name for prayer because of the link between prayer and the service of God in the Temple.<sup>44</sup> By saying the words of the daily prayers we are embodying divine service, we are acting like a kingdom of priests.<sup>45</sup>

## Story Telling

The daily prayer service is also an encounter with Jewish myth through the myriad citations of biblical texts. When we pray the words of the liturgy we give over our breath, our voice, our bodies to a whole set of Jewish stories that link our lives to visions of national redemption and communicate our collective purpose. The morning prayer service has a repetition of the peak experience of redemption at the sea, Exodus 15, when God rescues the people from certain death and completes their freedom. Three times a week the Torah is read out loud, a reenactment of the giving of Torah at Sinai.<sup>46</sup> Every service concludes with a meditation on a hoped for ultimate redemption of all of creation in *Aleinu*.

Let’s look at just one prayer, *Ashrei*, which is almost entirely made up of Ps 145. Said thrice daily,<sup>47</sup> it opens with the words *tehila le’david*, “a song of praise by David.”<sup>48</sup> By filling my mouth with this song, I am singing with David, singing as David. By means of this song I connect with God through the mouth of one of God’s most beloved servants, who is called a “man after God’s own heart.”<sup>49</sup> There are many other examples of the liturgy stimulating our imagination through

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<sup>44</sup> *B. Brakhot* 26b and *P. Berakhot* 4:1, 7b are the primary locations for the idea that daily prayer is equivalent to the sacrificial offerings that used to be performed in the Jerusalem Temple. For a full scholarly analysis of the creation of a non-Temple based, non-sacrificial liturgy see Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly* (Cincinnati, OH: HUC Press, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> Not a new insight; Lawrence Hoffman devotes a chapter to this idea of the performative power of liturgical language in his book *The Art of Public Prayer* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1988). He focuses on the alternative world which the worshipper calls into being by performing the service. The worshipper engages with words that are mistakenly thought of as intellectual claims and instead should be seen as anticipation of the future, exhortations to ourselves to take our own stories seriously, as commitments to the integrity of our own stories (239). “The words of prayer locate us in a continuum between a sacred past that we identify as our own and a vision of a future that we hope to realize as the logical outcome of the story of our lives” (242).

<sup>46</sup> For further analysis of the storied elements of the Torah service see Ruth Langer, “From Study of Scripture to a Reenactment of Sinai: The Emergence of the Synagogue Torah Service,” *Journal of Synagogue Music* 31, no. 1 (2006): 104–25.

<sup>47</sup> Dorff on Ashrei in *My People’s Prayer Book*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999), 112.

<sup>48</sup> This prayer appears in our earliest preserved complete prayer book, dating back to c. 875 CE, from Babylonia. See David Hedegard, ed. and trans., *Seder R. Amram Gaon Part I: Hebrew Text with Critical Apparatus, Translation with Notes and Introduction* (Lund, Sweden: A.-B. Ph. Lindstedts Universitets-Bokhandel, 1951), 32–33. The presence of the Ps in this siddur collection doesn’t necessitate that it was used widely by everyone in the Geonic period. Rashi comments on Shabbat 118b that only Ps 148 and 150 make up the daily *hallel*. In contrast, Isaac Alfasi, when commenting on the same Talmudic page, identified Ps 145 as beginning *psukei de’zimra*. For a fuller treatment of evidence for when this prayer became a part of daily public liturgy see Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 128.

<sup>49</sup> 1 Samuel 13:14.

evoking different central moments of biblical stories or using the words of central biblical characters. R. Eli Kaunfer, for example, has done a close intertextual study of the first paragraph of the *Amida* and found references to Melchizedek, Moses and the burning bush, and the experiences of Jeremiah, Daniel, and Abraham.<sup>50</sup> Jewish prayers dip into the storied past, inviting us to voice truths from the stories of these ancient heroes, to meditate on our own life in light of theirs.

A structural analysis of liturgy also yields narrative. Reuven Kimelman has convincingly argued that the *Amida* is a retelling of the anticipated redemption,<sup>51</sup> an opportunity to dream with God about the process of personal, national, and universal redemption that is yet to come. Jewish liturgical prayer puts us into a story that began before us and continues after us. Lawrence Hoffman points out that liturgy constructs reality through the storytelling of Jewish collective memory.<sup>52</sup> “The words of prayer,” Hoffman writes, “locate us in a continuum between a sacred past that we identify as our own and a vision of a future that we hope to realize as the logical outcome of the story of our lives.”<sup>53</sup> The *Amida* gives us a place in an epic narrative. *Tefilat keva* has the capacity to inflect the way we perceive the whole of reality, redirecting our *ta'avah* subtly, subconsciously, to love and live for the goods that God loves.

But can it also be a form of emotional engagement powerful enough to “open the sealed chambers of the heart and pour waters of understanding upon it?”<sup>54</sup> Can we enhance the desire-forming power of Jewish prayer by the quality of our regular habitual prayer practice? Can it be prayed in such a way that it taps into the power of *hitpa'alut*?

### **Emotional Engagement with Liturgical Text**

It is precisely here that attention to prayer as an ascetic practice can impact how we practice communal *tefilat keva*. If we understood that the goal of this kind of prayer could be *ta'avah* rectification, how might we engage the practice differently?

There are a variety of emotional goals currently at play in the American synagogue. For some American communities a primary emotional goal of their prayer services is to evoke nostalgia by singing tunes that remind people of their childhoods. For others a sense of communal belonging is the goal, so singing familiar communal tunes is a must. Nineteenth-century cantorial tunes that dominate many American Jewish high holiday prayers<sup>55</sup> seek to evoke an experience of awe before

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<sup>50</sup> Eli Kaunfer, “Interpreting Jewish Liturgy: The Literary Intertext Method,” PhD diss. (Jewish Theological Seminary, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Reuven Kimelman claims that the *amida* is an argument for redemption that begins with the affirmation of who God is, progresses to the experiences of redemption we can experience in our daily lives that supports our future hope, and culminates in a meditation on the redemption promised in the future by God for the nation and the world (“The Daily *Amida* and the Rhetoric of Redemption,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, LXXIX, No. 2-3 [October 1988–January 1989]: 165–97).

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer* (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1988), 236.

<sup>53</sup> Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer*, 242.

<sup>54</sup> Salanter, “Letter 30,” *Ohr Yisrael*, 331.

<sup>55</sup> Hoffman notes the difference in the cultural backdrop of nineteenth century Europeans and contemporary Americans in the final chapter of *The Art of Public Prayer*. He suggests that we “need to develop our worship in the direction of symbolic communication that enhances the sense of community in which the presence of God is manifest,

the *mysterium tremendum* by using operatic styles and choral singing. Some prayer spaces are markedly dull, and prayer leaders rush through the many words of the liturgy at breakneck speed, as if no thought at all is being given to the emotional capacity of the human person and its role in prayer. The mere saying of the words becomes the mark of success. In contrast, some of the American synagogues today that have been most effective at drawing in the un-shul-ed have relied heavily on their emotionally powerful prayer services.<sup>56</sup> These synagogues have managed to create a desire for more learning and more engagement in Jewish practice and Jewish community. From the perspective of liturgical asceticism, these successes indicate that they are having some success at tuning the *ta'avah* of their congregants.

The subtle and subconscious power of prayer to imprint on the “social imaginary” is also hindered in the American synagogue context by the fact that many Jews do not understand the words they are saying. They also do not have enough biblical or rabbinic literacy to notice the resonance of those texts with their prayers.<sup>57</sup> If they did, they would have more access to the stories evoked by our prayer language. There is also the problem of lack of knowledge of the covenantal theological story. This means that the subtle subconscious elements of *tefilat keva* are less reliably working. And this, along with a lack of emotionally potent prayer experiences, hampers the formation of a Jewish social imaginary, a Jewish way of imagining, intending, desiring and ultimately understanding the world. My hope is that this study of *ta'avah* formation and *tefilat keva* can cause us to more deeply appreciate *why* liturgical prayers are valuable and, to bring a new intentionality to service planning and Jewish education.

## Conclusion

Salanter’s theological anthropology can help us reimagine the ascetic<sup>58</sup> potential of *tefilat keva*. In contrast to the modern ideal of the human person as a good citizen and productive participant in the modern economy, Jewish liturgy teaches that there are other goals for the self, goals that transcend the vision of the good life as determined by political or economic ends. I am not arguing that there is some fundamental opposition between these purposes, but from the perspective of the ideal of *adam ha’shalem*, the whole perfected person, the goals of economic

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rather than the 19<sup>th</sup> century sense of awe that projected God into the distant void. We need spaces that do not separate laity from clergy; music that collapses social distance; accessible warm melodies and poetically touching texts” (275).

<sup>56</sup> I only have anecdotal evidence for this claim, coming from conversations with congregants at IKAR in Los Angeles, Romemu in New York City, and Mishkan in Chicago.

<sup>57</sup> The literary intertext method developed and expanded on by Eliezer Gershon Kaunfer (“Interpreting Jewish Liturgy”) is a helpful recent approach to filling this gap in knowledge.

<sup>58</sup> I am using the word ascetic in the sense that it is used by Sarah Coakley, a Christian theologian working on the recovery of Christian monastic practices of prayer and medication: “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’” (*The New Asceticism*, 18). I also draw on the work of Gavin Flood in thinking about the ascetic. Flood points out that the ascetic self is the outcome of an ordered limitation for the sake of attaining a higher freedom. The process of transformation is of conforming the body to a tradition’s habitus and cultivating a particular kind of awareness. The ascetic disrupts the habitus of the socially conditioned self and instead performs the tradition with her body and cultivating attentiveness to the tradition’s telos. The ascetic is a person who has a cultivated awareness of the ways in which her own formation by a tradition, the “entextualization” of her body, is a different subjugation of the self from the subjugation experienced by others to social expectations and their desires (*The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory, and Tradition* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 138).

prosperity or democratic citizenship are pedestrian.<sup>59</sup> This vision of liturgical formation suggests that prayer should be a practice that can be and ought to be disruptive of the contemporary socially conditioned self.

James K. A. Smith's application of the "social imaginary" and his interest in desire formation formed an important model for my own bringing together of the desire-forming power of story with Salanter's theological anthropology. The result of this work is a new understanding of why we pray that also has implications for how we ought to pray. For Smith, a Christian praying the liturgy is doing a habitual meaningful bodily act of participation in the life of the Trinity<sup>60</sup> that cultivates the imagination through engagement with the Christian story and transforms her loves by forming a Christian "social imaginary." A Salanterian-inflected version of this claim is that *tefilat keva* is a *ta'avah*-forming practice because it is a habitual, emotionally and imaginatively significant, narrative practice of enacting the service of the God of Israel.<sup>61</sup> As such *tefilat keva* is a spiritual practice that can bring about *tikkun ha'yetzter*, repair of the inclination, empowering a person to attain the ideal service of God in wholeness of heart through the formation of a Jewish vision of human flourishing.

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<sup>59</sup> One way of understanding a major thrust of liberalizing movements in Judaism is as attempts to minimize the dissonance between the modern conception of the self as citizen-consumer and traditional Judaism's transcendent aspirations. For an example of this kind of effort at play in the modern period see Jay R. Berkovitz, *Rights and Passages: The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Culture in France, 1650–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 222.

<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 150.

<sup>61</sup> Liturgy as formative of a religious imagination is not a new idea. Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, Emma O'Donnell, and Randi Rashkover have all talked about liturgy as formative of the imagination and of reason. Ruth Langer has written numerous essays on how Jewish liturgy treats theological concepts, for example revelation and the presentation of religious others. What I hope to offer this conversation is a discourse about formation rooted in a Jewish theological anthropology, and suggest that desire formation through the cultivation of a vision for human flourishing and through emotionally potent prayer services make liturgy a locus for Jewish formation that reaches beyond the realm of the merely religious and seeks to reorient the quality of human life.