TURNING TO JERUSALEM IN PRAYER

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The practice of facing Jerusalem when praying has been tenaciously preserved in traditional Judaism for thousands of years[1] and is firmly established in Halakha. The Jewish code of laws *Shulhan Arukh* includes it as one of the requirements of synagogue architecture: Doors and windows of the *bet knesset* should open towards Jerusalem so that one may pray towards it.[2] In the Code of Maimonides it is stipulated as the proper posture during prayer:

> If one is located outside the land, he should turn his face towards *Eretz Yisrael* and pray. If he is in the land, he should turn towards Jerusalem . . . if in Jerusalem, he should turn toward the Temple. If in the Temple, he should turn his face towards the Holy of Holies.[3]

In the popular mind, particularly in the lands of the Diaspora, the rationale of this practice always seemed quite self-evident. Some understood it in national terms, with the emphasis on Jerusalem. Turning towards Jerusalem and the land of Israel, from the "four corners of the earth" kept the Jew mindful of where he came from and where he longed to return. In a very realistic way, this compelled the Jew at all times and in all places to be mindful, in actual geographical terms, of the direction in which the city of Jerusalem was to be found. Should he decide tomorrow to return to Jerusalem, he will already know in which direction to set out.

Others thought of it in theological terms, with emphasis on the Temple. This is the unique spot on earth where God caused His Divine Presence to appear regularly and where He was worshipped by the people Israel for some 1,000 years.[4] It is fitting and proper that in prayer to God, one turns towards the site of His Holy Temple. One is, therefore, inclined to think that this practice is to be classified as one of the many observances decreed by the sages after the destruction of the Second Temple by which to "remember" the Holy Temple and its various rituals.[5]

As a matter of fact, however, its source is much earlier and a reference to the practice is already found in the biblical Book of Daniel:

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> *And when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house – now his windows were open in his upper chamber towards Jerusalem – and he kneeled upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime* (Dan. 6:11).

After the destruction of the First Temple, we do not hear of any systematic effort to memorialize the destruction except for some fast days (Est. 9:31). The period between the first destruction (586 BCE) and the rebuilding (515 BCE) was too short to develop a need for formal ways to remember.

Indeed, I wish to suggest that Daniel in Babylon turning towards Jerusalem in prayer had nothing to do with the destruction of the Temple. He was merely following a custom that had been set down by none other than Solomon, son of David, third king of Israel, and builder of the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Temple was completed and stood there in all its magnificence, an elaborate dedication celebration took place in the presence of the elders, the heads of the tribes, the princes of the heads of houses and all the men of Israel (I Kg. 8:22-53). The holy Ark of the Covenant was brought into the Temple to the accompaniment of peace offerings and the singing and music of the Levites, and a cloud seen as the Glory of God filled the House (II Chron. 5:11-14). After the King blessed all the congregation of Israel, he stood before the altar of the Lord and, spreading forth his hands towards heaven, addressed God in the presence of the entire congregation, and delivered an oration which is considered most remarkable for the following reasons.

1. It is an unusually long address consisting of 31 verses.

2. In speaking of the function of the Temple as House of God, Solomon refers only to prayer and makes no mention of sacrifices.[6]

What is the content of Solomon's address? After noting the incongruity of conceiving of the Temple as a place that can house the infinite transcendent Presence of God at a time when *the heavens and the heavens of heavens cannot contain Him* (I Kg. 8:27), Solomon goes on to entreat God to *hearken . . . to the prayers, supplications and cries* of His people Israel and of the stranger who might turn to Him in time of famine, pestilence or war for forgiveness and salvation.

Now, it is all very understandable for Solomon to entreat God to hearken to the prayers of His people. However, why, in order that this may happen, does

Solomon ask that *Thine eyes be open towards this House, the place where You said Thy Name shall be there night and day* (8:29)?[7] What does man's prayer to God, whom Solomon explicitly locates in heaven *Yea, hear You in heaven, Thy dwelling place. . .* (8:30) have to do with the Temple in Jerusalem? It might be thought that there is some special efficacy in praying in the Temple in Jerusalem.[7] Yet, of the several different types of situations described by Solomon in which a man might turn to God, only two can possibly be interpreted as taking place ***in*** *this House* [*babayet hazeh*] (8:31,33). In others, the petitioner clearly is in the land of Israel but outside the Temple and is praying ***towards*** *the place* [*el hamakom hazeh, el habayit hazeh*] (8:35, 38).

In his final example, Solomon speaks of Israelite captives in the land of their enemy, who pray to God ***by way*** *of the city* [derech ha'ir] *that You have chosen* (8:44) or ***by way*** *of their land* [derech artzam] *that You have given to their forefathers* (8:48) or ***by way*** *of the House* [derech habayit] *that I built for Your Name* (8:48). Essentially, therefore, Solomon is asking God to hearken to these prayers, not only because they are presumably sincere and deserving, but also because they have this special property of being made "towards" or "by way of" this land, this city, this House.

How is this to be understood? Was actually to face in the direction of Jerusalem all that Solomon had in mind?

Once we consider that it is "Solomon the Wise" who gives ample evidence of his sophisticated theological understanding of the purpose of the Temple (I Kg. 5:9-12), and who so demonstratively selects and then repeats these special expressions in his address, we are impelled to seek a deeper meaning. For Solomon repeatedly makes this praying "by way of Jerusalem" a condition for God responding to these prayers. Surely, then, he could not have been simply referring to "facing in the direction of Jerusalem."

I therefore wish to suggest the following:

To pray to God "by way of the land of Israel" and Jerusalem and the Holy Temple is to see oneself as a member of the covenanted House of Israel who identifies with its history and embraces its destiny. It is to pray to the God who has revealed Himself in the great events of this history. The significance of praying "by way of the land" is to acknowledge the Hand of God in the biblical events leading to God's giving it to the forefathers. To pray "by way

of Jerusalem" is to acknowledge God's Providence in the events leading to the establishment of the united monarchy and God's "choosing" of Jerusalem. Finally, praying "by way of the Temple" is to apprehend that the Name of God is associated with the Covenant between God and Israel, whose testimony lies in the Holy of Holies. So, while the Jew addresses the universal, transcendent Creator, God Who "is in heaven," he relates to this God by way of the Jewish historical experience.

We always pray to the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And God introduces Himself to Israel as *the God who took you out of the land of Egypt.* Even the non-Jew who *shall come out of a far country for Thy name's sake – for they shall hear of Thy great Name and of Thy mighty Hand and outstretched Arm* (8:42) – he too shall pray "towards this House." This means that, while his path to God may have its origin in different sources, he must at some point acknowledge the authenticity of Israel's religious experience. It has already been noted: "No other Biblical speech is built up so lucidly and conceived in such sublime religious terms that are both dispassionately universal and intensely national."[8]

NOTES

1. The remains of ancient synagogues, whether in Israel or in the Diaspora, testify to the practice that "worship is directed towards Jerusalem" (pp. 5,6) and "Galilean synagogues with entrances facing Jerusalem" (p. 12). See L.I. Levine, *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981).
2. Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, Hilkot Tefillah, 90:4.
3. Hilkot Tefillah 5:3.
4. 950 BCE - 70 CE.
5. See Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, Section 560.
6. This could be the basis for the conception that is proclaimed by Isaiah in the name of God: *For My House shall be called a House of Prayer for all the nations* (Isa. 46:7).
7. A colleague of mine suggested in jest that perhaps the Temple in Jerusalem was God's "mailing address".
8. F. Thieberger, *King Solomon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947) p. 198.