



December 2007

The (Odd) Deixis of 'You' in Rabbinic Prayer

Daniel H. Weiss
University of Cambridge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr>



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Weiss, Daniel H.. "The (Odd) Deixis of 'You' in Rabbinic Prayer." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 5, no. 1 (2007): 4-28. <https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-9kmr-bj63>.

This Primary Essay is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Textual Reasoning by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

THE (ODD) DEIXIS OF 'YOU' IN RABBINIC PRAYER

DANIEL WEISS

University of Virginia

Anyone who opens a *siddur*, a Jewish prayerbook, will quickly notice that many parts of the traditional liturgy are formulated as an address in the second person, using the word 'you.' If an innocent questioner should happen to ask, "What is the meaning of these repeated occurrences of 'you'? To whom does the 'you' refer? Who is being addressed?" a common reply might be, "Obviously, the 'you' refers to God, to whom the prayers are addressed." While such a response is not necessarily erroneous, the jump from 'you' to 'God' may be too hasty and potentially misleading. In this essay, I take a closer look at some of the ways that 'you' functions in rabbinic prayer. My primary approach will be to analyze the language of prayer in light of the concept designated in pragmatics¹ as 'deixis.' This analysis will reveal some unique and unexpected properties of the 'you' of prayer, especially when contrasted with the typical use of 'you' in other contexts. Throughout, I draw upon examples from the traditional Jewish

¹ Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of language as it is used in a social context.

liturgy, which I assess and interpret according to the wide-ranging implications of rabbinic prayer's odd deixis.

Unlike other instances of deixis, the 'you' of prayer functions in the absence of contextual specification.

Deixis can be understood as the way in which certain utterances 'point' to features of the circumstances in which they were spoken.² While the meaning of some utterances can be understood without knowledge of their context of utterance (e.g. "Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world"), the meaning of a deictic utterance is dependent on, and can change with, the context in which it is uttered. For example, in order to adequately interpret the statement, "I love you," we would need to know more details about the circumstances in which it was spoken: who is saying it, and to whom is it said? The mere words of the utterance are not sufficient; we must also know the identity of the speaker and the addressee in order to determine whom the deictic words "I" and "you" point to. In the absence of such knowledge, communication and understanding will tend to break down. Consider the following example: "[I]magine that the lights go out as Harry has just begun saying: 'Listen, I'm not disagreeing with *you* but with *you*, and not about *this* but about *this*.'"³ If the lights had not gone out, the direction of Harry's glance or his pointing finger would have enabled us to understand the referents of his two utterances of the word 'you.' In the dark, without the specifying and contextualizing visual information, we cannot understand Harry's intended meaning and reference. Similarly, if I am listening to a tape-recorded conversation of a group of people, and I hear one voice say, "You should come sit over here," I won't know who is being addressed.

² Stephen C. Levinson provides the following, more formal, definition: "[D]eixis concerns the ways in which languages encode or grammaticalize features of the context of utterance or speech event, and thus also concerns ways in which the interpretation of utterances depends on the analysis of that context of utterance." See Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.54.

³ Levinson, *Pragmatics*, pp. 54-55.

Or, suppose that I am walking down the street, and I notice a folded-up piece of paper in the gutter. I pick it up, unfold it, and discover a note written on it, which reads, "You mean everything to me." However, I have no idea who left the note, and thus both the 'you' and the 'me' remain unspecified. In each of these cases, a context is lacking, and the 'you' alone does not enable me to determine the utterance's meaning.

These examples of deixis demonstrate that a further specification of context is necessary for a hearer to properly interpret the utterances in question. In those examples, though, the *speaker* did not require further information i.e. since Harry already knew who he was addressing before the lights went out, he could utter his statement even in the dark. However, there are cases where a lack of context can prevent a speaker from speaking. Suppose I dial a phone number, and someone picks up on the other end and says, "Hello." If I recognize that person's voice, I can comfortably say, "How are you?" or even "I love you" or "I hate you."

Once the person has been identified, I know who I am speaking to, and I am then able to use the word 'you.'

In contrast, suppose I dial a phone number, and someone picks up on the other end but says nothing. In the absence of further information that would identify the addressee, it would be strange for me to say, "How are you?" let alone "I love you" or "I hate you." Thus, the lack of specification prevents the saying of 'you.'

If such are the typical circumstances of the use of the word 'you,' we find a very different situation when we turn to rabbinic prayer. Here, the word 'you' appears to be employed without any of the empirical elements (e.g. visual, auditory) that are normally required to specify and identify the referent of 'you.' Thus, although I may directly observe another person using the word 'you' in prayer, I am put in the position, as it were, of one who is listening to a tape recording: the only available specification is 'you.' Furthermore, even the person who speaks the word 'you' in prayer has no further specification: she too has only 'you.'⁴

⁴ This is not to say that the 'you' of prayer has nothing in common with more typical deictic utterance. As with all instances of deixis, the use of the word 'you' in prayer can be understood as 'pointing' at something (although, as we shall see, the term 'something,' being

At the same time, nothing is lacking or missing. In most cases, proper interpretation depends on additional specification; without this, the meaning of utterances involving 'you' remains ambiguous and indeterminate. As indicated by the examples above, a person placed in such a situation will *feel* the lack: in the case where the lights went out as Harry began to speak, someone might respond, "I couldn't tell who you were talking about!" Likewise, if the person on the other end of the telephone doesn't identify herself, I might ask, "Who's there?" before addressing her with 'you.' In contrast, no additional specification accompanies the use of 'you' in prayer, and yet people do not demand such specification, as they would in other circumstances.

One way of accounting for the odd use of 'you' in prayer is to say that prayer constitutes a unique use of the word 'you' in which *no further contextual specification is necessary*. Whereas additional specification normally serves to overcome the ambiguity of the deictic 'you' and thereby uniquely identify the object of the address, the 'you' who is addressed in prayer is uniquely identified simply by the word 'you.' That is to say, in prayer, 'you' is sufficient in itself. As such, this mode of speech could also be described as one of sheer address. Put differently, we might say that the very absence of specification is itself a form of specification: there is only one who can be addressed by 'you' alone; all other addressees require further contextual details.

Once we observe that specification is not *necessary* for the use of 'you' in prayer, we are led to the recognition that such specification is also not possible or appropriate. One would not say, "Yes, in this instance of prayer, there happens to be no additional specification in connection with 'you,' but perhaps in another instance there might be additional specification." Rather, prayer is *characterized* by the complete absence of such specification. One need not, but also can not, specify further if

in the third person, is somewhat problematic). Likewise, this utterance of 'you' takes place a context of sorts, in that the 'you' of prayer is uttered in the context of the siddur and the prayer service as a whole. Still, important differences remain, and my aim here is to highlight and explore the significance of these departures from normal deixis.

empirical specifying features were part of a supposed case of prayer, it might well be labeled as idolatry. At the same time, this restriction also serves as a form of unique identification: the ‘you’ of prayer is specified, oddly, by the impossibility of further specification. That is, the ‘you’ addressed in prayer is precisely identified as the ‘you’ who cannot be further specified, the ‘you’ for whom no finite specification is appropriate.⁵

Now, someone might agree with my observation that the use of ‘you’ in prayer occurs in the absence of *outward* specification but then argue that there *is* specification of an ‘inward’ variety. “Yes, it is intriguing that prayer does not involve or require visual or auditory contextualization; however, the ‘you’ is not complete in itself it requires that the praying individual be thinking of *God*, and not another person or deity.”

However, according to my model, the lack of outward specification is indicative of the inappropriateness of *all* specification, whether through sight and sound or in thought and conceptualization.

The ‘you’ of prayer strips away the significance of particular names.

My goal in this essay is to present prayer as addressed to ‘you’ by means of ‘you’-alone, to the ‘you’ who can be (and can only be) addressed in the absence of further specification.⁶ Lacking such specification, we ought to be wary about saying that prayer is “an address to God.”⁷ While the term ‘God’ or particular divine names may be present in the words of prayers, these are not necessarily an essential part of the grammatical or pragmatic structure of prayer and can potentially distract from the primacy and uniqueness of the ‘you.’ To illustrate, I will examine and

⁵ This last phrase has echoes of the idea (common to many philosophical accounts of God) that finite attributes cannot be applied to the infinite God. However, while most philosophical accounts derive this impossibility from a presupposition of “God’s infinite nature,” my description begins with the odd deixis of ‘you’ that can be observed in prayer. It may be that philosophers arrived at their ‘presuppositions’ in part from previous familiarity with actual instances of the practice of prayer.

⁶ Perhaps we might say: to *du an sich*.

⁷ Although one might say that God is “the one addressed in prayer.”

interpret the sentence," *Mi khamokha ba'elim adonai*," which is part of the Friday evening liturgy and is taken from Exodus 15:11.⁸ In its written form, the final word of the phrase is the tetragrammaton, YHWH, but when uttered in prayer, the final word is vocalized in the Jewish tradition as "*adonai*," "my lord." Thus, one might translate the written version as "Who is like you among the gods, O YHWH?" while the spoken version could be translated as "Who is like you among the gods, O my lord?" Here, I will examine the pragmatic implications of each version as well as the significance of the difference between the two versions.

Let us begin with the written version, "Who is like you among the gods, O YHWH?" At first glance (and perhaps in its original historical context), the statement appears to praise and elevate a certain deity, designated by the name YHWH, above other deities.⁹ Taken in this sense, it could be seen as equivalent to "Who is like the god YHWH among the other gods?"¹⁰ Accordingly, the 'you' would simply be a substitute for the particular name YHWH, used in a typical deictic form of address. In other words, the 'you' alone would *not* be complete in itself, and to omit the final name i.e. simply saying, "Who is like you among the gods?" would leave the address vague and unspecified. Without the concluding, "O YHWH," an interlocutor might protest, "Who does the 'you' refer to? Who is being addressed? How do we know that the 'you' doesn't refer to Baal or Marduk?" In the typical (non-prayer) use of 'you,' such objections would be completely legitimate.

However, when viewed in light of my interpretation of the 'you' of prayer as fully specifying in itself, the statement takes on a very different sense. Here, since 'you' is not a substitute or placeholder for another name,

⁸ *Siddur Sim Shalom: a prayer book for Shabbat, festivals, and weekdays*, ed. Jules Harlow (New York: Rabbinical Assembly: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1989), p. 290. All liturgical excerpts used in this essay are found in the Friday evening service and will be identified in the body of the essay by their page number in *Siddur Sim Shalom*.

⁹ See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: an entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 56-70.

¹⁰ I.e. YHWH belongs to the class of 'gods' and is the greatest from among them.

the formulation “Who is like you among the gods?” would also be complete in itself. As it appears in the biblical and liturgical texts, the statement does not ask, “Who is like YHWH among the gods”; instead, it asks, “Who is like *you*?” That is, the primary contrast is not between “YHWH” and “the gods,” but rather between “you” and “the gods.” It is not “YHWH” who is being singled out for praise, but rather “you.” No longer is it a matter of one deity being praised above his fellow deities; since “you” is in the second person, while “the gods” is in the third person, we now have a contrast that involves a qualitative difference of categories. In other words, we could reformulate the statement as “Who is like the 2nd person among the 3rd persons?” or “Who is like the *you* among the *its*?”^{11,12}

Furthermore, since the ‘you’ of prayer consists of ‘you’ only, with no additional specifying features, we can say that the ‘you’ of prayer, the mere-‘you,’ is equivalent to the ‘wholly other’ or ‘absolutely other’ — that is, as mere address, the sole identifying characteristic is that of otherness. As such, “*Mi khamokha*” gains added significance; the phrase “Who is like you?” can now be understood as “Who is like the absolutely other?” In its original context, the statement may have been an attempt to declare that the gods of all other nations pale in comparison to YHWH, and this stance may have had an element of ethnocentrism or tribal bias. However, when the ‘you’ of the statement is taken to be ‘you’-alone, the ‘you’ that fully specifies in itself, then the assertion of incomparability is no mere chauvinism but is an obvious and logical property of the ‘you’-alone, of

¹¹ However, neither of these reformulations is fully adequate, since neither “the 2nd person” nor “the you” are the same as “you” in the form of address. Both “the 2nd person” and “the you” are abstract conceptualizations, whereas “you” in performative prayer-address (i.e. “you”-alone) is free from/goes beyond conceptualization. That is, both “the 2nd person” and “the you” are third-person terms and are therefore qualitatively different from the second-person use of “you” in prayer. As such, the reformulations given here should not be treated as synonymous with or as translations of the original addressive utterance.

¹² We could analyze the first of the Ten Commandments — “You shall have no other gods before me” — in a similar fashion. That is, one way of understanding this is that one god (YHWH) forbids the worship of other gods. However, we could also look at it as a contrast between “gods” and “me.” All gods (or even God) should be rejected; only the one who says “me” — i.e. the one to whom we say “you” — is worthy of service. In other words, the commandment can be understood as: “You shall have no 3rd persons before the 1st person.”

the absolutely other: since there are no specifying characteristics, there is nothing which could serve as a basis for comparison.

These observations can shed light on the traditional contrast between 'God' and 'the gods.' It is often claimed that 'God' is not 'a god' or 'one of the gods' but is instead qualitatively different. However, it is not always clear what this difference consists in, apart from a capitalized letter. Often, the way that religious practitioners speak about 'God' (especially when denigrating other religious traditions) seems very much like the venerating of one deity (i.e. "my god") over another deity (i.e. "his god"). I hold that the contrast between 'you' and 'gods' is much clearer and more substantive than that between 'God' and 'gods.' 'God' and 'gods' are both third-person designations and hence fall under the same category. The true qualitative difference is found in 'you,' and one could even view the concept of 'God' as a projection onto the third person of the second-person 'you'-alone of prayer. While potentially legitimate if recognized as such a projection, the third-person term 'God' is more often treated as a particular name that diverges from 'you'-alone and can even come to oppose it. Such a development ought not be surprising, since the second person is *not* the same as the third person, and treating them interchangeably will inevitably lead to distortion. Hence, while it is not technically wrong to say that "one addresses God in prayer," it is, practically speaking, a potentially misleading phrasing that ought to be treated with caution. Part of the problem stems from the impossibility of adequately translating from the second person to the third person, from address to description. If, in an attempt to explain what happens in prayer, person A tells person B, "I address you in prayer," this would be blasphemy, since person A ought not to be praying to person B.¹³ Even if we try to insert quotation marks into the statement, so that person A says to person B, "I address 'you' in prayer," such written signs are not distinguishable in actual speech. In addition, such a description still turns 'you' into a third-person name, creating the same distortion as does 'God.'

¹³ Despite the inadequacy of this attempt, A himself has no more than 'you' and so has nothing else that he could say.

No solution is possible, since the 'you' of address (and especially the 'you'-alone of prayer) simply has no equivalent in description. Accordingly, a formulation such as "In prayer one addresses God," is probably as good as any other descriptive formulation, but the priority of the addressive 'you'-alone must constantly be kept in mind.

However, if the primary focus of "*Mi khamokha*" should be placed on 'you,' how ought we to understand the fact that the statement *does* end with "O YHWH"? I claim that the particular name that concludes the phrase is in many ways superfluous. Since the 'you' of prayer already specifies completely, the name does not add any new information, as it would in non-prayer instances of 'you.'¹⁴ While the particular name might have been more important in its original historical context (where YHWH was one god among many), the statement is transformed by its use in prayer, which shifts the focus away from the particular name and towards the 'you' alone.¹⁵ While it may seem presumptuous for me to so cavalierly dismiss a divine name, the Jewish prayer tradition has itself displayed a similar tendency. That is, when YHWH, the tetragrammaton, appears in prayers, the custom is not to pronounce the name as it is written but rather to say "*adonai*," meaning "my lord" or "my master."¹⁶ "My lord" is not a proper name in the sense of a label used to differentiate one person (or

¹⁴ Cf. the observation made by Kierkegaard/Johannes Climacus in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "With regard to loving... it holds true that a person cannot say what or whom he loves by defining the 'how.' All lovers have the 'how' of erotic love in common, and now the particular individual must add the name of his beloved. But with regard to having faith (*sensu strictissimo* [in the strictest sense]), it holds true that this 'how' fits only one object." Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.613fn.

¹⁵ Some places in the Bible itself already indicate a hesitancy to name God. For example, in Exodus 3:13- 14, Moses requests the name of the one who is speaking from the burning bush and receives the answer "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*." This is less like a name in the normal sense, and more like a relation. It can also be understood as a type of non-answer to the name-question.

¹⁶ "*Adonai*" is actually a plural form, meaning "my lords." I'm not aware of the origin/significance of the plural in this case, but it is likely related to the fact that the plural form "*elohim*" is used (with singular verb forms) as a designation for God in the Hebrew Bible.

god) from another; it indicates a relation between the speaker and the addressee. 'Adon' (lord, master) is the counterpart to 'eved' (slave, servant), and so by saying "adonai," the speaker is placing himself in the role of servant. Thus, we might translate "Mi khamokha ba'elim adonai" as "Who is like you among the gods, O you-whom-I-serve?" Thus, "adonai" does not attempt to add any specification to the identity of the 'you' who is addressed; it simply indicates the speaker's relation of service to that 'you.' Thus, in its spoken modification (*keri*) of the written text (*ketiv*) and in its move towards a wholly relational form of address, the Jewish tradition demonstrates that the name of a particular deity is neither a necessary nor appropriate part of prayer.¹⁷ The tradition of not pronouncing the divine name can even be seen as a natural consequence of the sufficiency of 'you' in prayer. That is, if nothing need be said beyond 'you,' the pronunciation of any names would be improper, since this would imply that the 'you' needed further specification and was *not* sufficient in itself.¹⁸

In addition, the analysis of prayer presented here has interesting implications for the 'catholicity' of God. If the 'you' is fully sufficient and the particular divine name superfluous, the importance of prioritizing one named deity over another also appears to fade. That is, in the typical (non-prayer) use of 'you,' there would appear to be a significant difference between "Who is like you, O YHWH" and "Who is like you, O Marduk."¹⁹ If supreme preeminence among the gods is attributed to YHWH and Marduk, respectively, then the two statements are mutually exclusive, since there can be (logically speaking) at most one deity who is supreme over all other deities. However, once the emphasis shifts toward the 'you'

¹⁷ It would be interesting to know whether this process of un-naming can also be found in the prayer practices of other religious traditions.

¹⁸ This can serve as an additional illustration of why the fact that no further specification is necessary also implies that no further specification is appropriate. Because "can" implies "needs," we can conclude by way of the contrapositive that the "need not" implies "can not."

¹⁹ Formulations that assert the incomparability of a deity (e.g. Marduk, Sin, Shamash, Aton) are quite common in ancient Near Eastern literature. See Levenson, *Sinai & Zion*, pp.63-64.

and away from the particular name, the utterances lose their incompatibility and become identical in their pragmatic functioning.²⁰ While this does not imply that a single individual could affirm both statements simultaneously, it should make a person more hesitant to insist that a member of another religious tradition must automatically be “doing something different” simply because he or she employs different names or formulations in prayer.²¹ Frequently, particular names for God (or even the name ‘God’) can become semantic red herrings that distract from the commonality of the ‘you’ in the actual prayer practices of diverse religious traditions.

We can also view the contrast between the written form of “YHWH” and the spoken form of “*adonai*” in relation to the difference between what might be called monolatrous and monotheistic orientations.²² Indeed, we could even imagine a scenario in which prayer could play a role in bringing about a transition from the former toward the latter attitude: if the emphasis in “Who is like you among gods, O YHWH” is initially on

²⁰ Put differently, one might say that the two become pragmatically equivalent while remaining semantically contradictory.

²¹ Herbert H. Farmer also remarks on the tendency for the practice of prayer to blur certain types of religious distinctions: “[T]here is, in the act of prayer and worship, an inherent tendency towards what may be called concentration. Worship...is the assembling together of the whole being, and the focusing of it, in a unitary way, on the divine reality...We may surmise that at moments of living prayer and worship there is in primitive man a turning to a god as if he were in fact the one and only God, thought without any expressly formulated denial of the existence of others; for the time being, the god worshipped fill the whole sphere of the divine.” Herbert H. Farmer, *Revelation and Religion* (New York: AMS Press, [1981, c1954]), p. 105. (See also Levenson, *Sinai & Zion*, p.63.) Farmer notes the “inherent tendency” for concentration in prayer to unite the many into one, thus making the experience of “god-worship” equivalent to that of “God- worship.” Similarly, I hold that concentration in prayer can also have the effect of reducing the significance of particular specifying details of the addressee (such as names) until only the ‘you’ of address remains.

²² However, in our understanding of “monotheism” it is important to distinguish between the oneness and the uniqueness of God. According to Hermann Cohen, it is the latter that characterizes the Jewish understanding of God. His account of “uniqueness” has much in common with my portrayal here of the sufficiency of the ‘you.’ See Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1995), p.35ff.

"YHWH," the repeated use of this phrase in *performative address* of prayer (in which pragmatic elements become more prominent, while semantic elements are less salient) could shift the emphasis more towards "you" and away from the particular name.²³ As the pragmatic emphasis on 'you' increases, the religious situation can become progressively riper for a transition to the conscious affirmation of the unique

God, in which *all* of the emphasis is on 'you.'²⁴ This transition may be even more likely to occur if the act of prayer-address takes place in the absence of visible idols. While it is still possible for a person to have an "invisible idol" (e.g. in terms of conceptual reifications), the lack of visual specification (so that there is nothing—no "thing"—to latch on to) combined with the utterance of "you" can increase one's propensity toward actually addressing the mere-'you.' While it is by no means clear that this hypothetical sequence corresponds to the actual history of past religious development, it is intriguing, and not utterly implausible, to locate one potential source of increasing monotheism in the practice of prayer.²⁵

²³ Here, the act of performative address is to be contrasted with the act reflective speculation, in which the semantic element will predominate. In reflection, the second-person 'you' disappears, and the particular name will stand out more sharply and will accordingly appear more significant.

²⁴ A similar transition could be understood as applying to the Shema. In its written form, it reads, "*Shema yisrael, YHWH eloheinu, YHWH ehad.*" In its original historical setting, its sense might have been something like: "Hear O Israel, YHWH is our god, YHWH only." In other words, Israel is enjoined to worship only YHWH and no other gods. As the transition towards 'monotheism' occurred, and the sense of the last clause might have moved closer to "YHWH is unique." Furthermore, in the traditional liturgical enunciation of the Shema, the reading of 'YHWH' as '*adonai*' moves the prayer closer to the second person: "Hear O Israel, my lord is our god, my lord is unique." If we move translate completely to the second person, substituting 'you' for 'YHWH,' the meaning could become: "you are our god, you alone," or, "our god is you, you alone," or, "our god is 'you,' 'you'-alone." In other words, 'you'-alone, mere-'you' is our god, whom we worship exclusively.

²⁵ Later in this essay, I argue that 'monotheism' ought to be understood not as an ideological position that a person can 'hold,' but rather as an ideal or task that one must continually strive to actualize. However, while a person can potentially become more and more monotheistic, it is impossible for someone to ever truly "be a monotheist." Thus, there can never be a full transition from monolatry to monotheism. The above paragraph states only

Predicates and the existential demands of the 'you' of prayer.

While this transition to 'you'-alone can have a broadening effect on one's view of the religiosity of other groups, it also creates distinctive restrictions and responsibilities. I have said that the use of 'you' in prayer is sufficient in itself and does not require any further specification; as such, it can be characterized as 'you'-alone, or mere-'you.' However, this description refers to an ideal case; not all acts of pronouncing the word 'you' in a "prayer context" are automatically equivalent to the act of saying mere-'you'. While outward (visual, auditory) specifying elements are already absent, the pray-er must also take care lest he or she add extraneous concepts or thoughts to what should be 'you'-alone. Indeed, the very absence of outward factors makes it easier to deceive oneself regarding inappropriate inward accretions to the 'you.'²⁶ The true 'you'-alone contains no other features, and so the speaking of this 'you' is sheer address, an address to the absolutely other from oneself. However, if additional concepts are present, these concepts belong to the speaker himself and are not fully other. Hence, one who speaks 'you' in this way actually addresses a projection of his own ego. If the statement "Who is like you, o my lord" are spoken with such an adulterated-egoized 'you,' the speaker is engaging in self-worship.²⁷ The saying of mere-'you' is no easy task and it may not even be fully achievable by human beings. As such, all human utterances of 'you' in prayer may contain a degree of ego-projection. Still, different utterances of 'you' can be closer or further from the ideal saying of 'you'-alone, and thus concentration, self-examination, and an active striving towards this ideal are crucially important.

that the practice of prayer could conceivably lead to increasingly monotheistic attitudes and thought patterns, and that one might be able to trace the evidence of those changes in the speech and writings of an individual, society, or culture.

²⁶ On the other hand, the mode of address can itself aid the speaker in her task freeing herself from inappropriate conceptualizations. That is, because concepts are confined to the mode of reflection (the 3rd person), the very act of saying 'you' (in the 2nd person) moves the speaker to a domain in which concepts have no foothold.

²⁷ In this context, one might define idolatry as saying 'lord' to anyone other than mere-'you.'

This need for focus highlights another difference between the use of 'you' in prayer and its typical deictic use. Normally, the meaning of an utterance involving 'you' is determined by external contextual factors. Levinson provides the example, "You are the mother of Napoleon." Such an utterance is true "just in case the addressee is indeed the mother of Napoleon."²⁸ Similarly, anyone can appropriately say, "You have red hair," so long as the person standing before them actually has red hair. In other words, the burden in these cases lies entirely with the empirical evidence regarding the addressee; the 'you' serves primarily as a pointer, and no existential concentration is required of the speaker. In the case of prayer, because no external evidence or specification is present, the burden is shifted to the speaker of the words, and the 'you' becomes subject to the dangers of ego-ization, as described above. In terms of "*Mi khamokha*," we could say that in the normal usage of 'you,' the statement "You are incomparable, O YHWH," would automatically be legitimate, independently of the speaker's stance, so long as the addressee was actually YHWH and YHWH was truly incomparable. However, as the focus shifts to 'you' and away from the particular name, the importance of such external considerations fades away, and the legitimacy of the utterance becomes dependent on the extent to which the 'you' that is spoken is a speaking of 'you'-alone.

Since my thesis has emphasized the danger of conceptual accretions to the 'you', how ought we then to understand the many instances of Jewish prayer that appear to predicate qualities of the one addressed in prayer? For instance, consider the statement from the Amidah, "*Ata gibor l'olam adonai*," "You are powerful infinitely, my lord" (304). If the 'you' already specifies and identifies completely, don't predicates seem inappropriate, since there is no additional information that needs to be conveyed? What role, then, does the subsequent "are powerful" play? One possible account is the following: in principle, the saying of 'you' contains everything that needs to be said. Accordingly, "you are powerful" must

²⁸ Levinson, *Pragmatics*, p. 56.

already be implied by the saying of mere-‘you’; the former follows naturally from the latter. That is, a person who is able to utter ‘you’-alone would also readily acknowledge “you are powerful.” Thus, although nothing more *needs* to be said beyond ‘you,’ the predicate (in this case, “powerful”) can be *helpful* for directing the speaker’s attention and awareness to a particular feature of the relation to the ‘you’-alone. Since the saying of ‘you’-alone is a difficult task, focusing on different aspects at different times can serve as an important form of training and exercise.²⁹ Put differently, one who can already say ‘you’-alone would not need to say “you are powerful” (since this would be implied by her saying of ‘you’), but those—i.e. all human beings—who are still striving to say ‘you’-alone can be aided by saying “you are powerful.”

The recognition that the predicates are already implied by mere-‘you’ also plays an important role in understanding the meaning of those predicates. Consider the sentence from the Kiddush for Shabbat evening: “*Ki vanu bacharta, v’otanu kidashta, mi kol ha’amim*,” “For you have chosen us and sanctified us from among all the peoples” (726). Here, the fact that the ‘you’ in this utterance is mere-‘you’ determines the proper interpretation of ‘chosen.’ While the word ‘chosen’ can have different senses in different situations, not all of these senses can be appropriately linked to mere-‘you.’³⁰ Accordingly, if a person’s saying of ‘you’ diverges from the ideal mere-‘you’ (i.e. if the saying of ‘you’ is marred by egoistic

²⁹ One can view in a similar manner those parts of the liturgy that refer to the addressee in the third person. Because the same word, “you,” is also used in non-prayer addresses, its use in prayer has the potential to obscure the uniqueness of the prayer-addressee. Without concentration, one’s uttering of ‘you’ can slip into the everyday use of the term, which requires less effort but which diverges from the mere-‘you.’ For this reason, a third-person phrasing, with a unique name that is used only in prayer, can help maintain the speaker’s awareness of the difference and distinctiveness of the ‘you’-alone. However, as discussed above, this mode of expression has its own particular risks, such as objectification. Thus, second- person and third-person formulations each have advantages and disadvantages. The liturgy’s alternation between the two modes may represent an attempt to allow for mutual correction, avoiding the one-sided distortion that can arise from any single mode of expression.

³⁰ Put differently, since all the predicates must already be contained in and follow from the mere-‘you,’ we could say that not all senses of ‘chosen’ will validly follow from mere-‘you.’

conceptualizations), his or her understanding of the predications will also be distorted. Without the proper relation to 'you'-alone, one is more likely to interpret this "chosenness" in an improper and egoistic manner (in this case, group-egoistic rather than individual-egoistic).³¹ Thus, when considering 'chosen,' as well as all other predicates, we must refrain from automatically applying our instinctive connotations of the word, since some of them may not be valid for the 'you'-alone; indeed, the context of prayer can often radically transform our everyday understanding of many words and predicates.³²

Part of the reason for this transformation stems from the fact that the saying of 'you'-alone is a form of sheer address, sheer relation, without a separate object to which the predicates are attached. Let me illustrate this through "*Ata gibor.*" In saying, "You are powerful," I acknowledge that I stand in a relation to powerfulness. Compare this to a statement that is phrased in the third person such as, "God is powerful." This latter statement implies that a) there exists a particular entity/being/object, "God" and b) this entity is powerful. However, it does not in itself imply that the speaker has any relation to this entity. In contrast, when I say,

³¹ The two principles described in this and the preceding paragraph constitute a dialectic, a type of relational-hermeneutic circle: on the one hand, the predicates can help focus attention so as to better enable the saying of mere-'you.' On the other hand, the saying of mere-'you' enables proper interpretation of the predicates. John J. O'Keefe and R.R. Reno find a similar dialectic among many ancient Christian theologians: on the one hand, they saw Scripture as the ultimate source of moral and spiritual truths; on the other hand, they held that proper interpretation of Scripture requires a proper moral and spiritual discipline. See John J. O'Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: an introduction to early Christian interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 23, 130.

³² For example, consider the application of this principle to another section of the liturgy: "*Kadshenu b'mitzvotecha, v'ten helkenu b'toratecha, sabenu mi'tuvecha, v'samhenu bishuatecha, v'taher libenu l'avdecha b'emet,*" "Sanctify us with your commandments, and let your Torah/instruction be our portion, satisfy us with your goodness, and gladden us with your saving help, and purify our hearts so that we may serve you truly" (298). While 'commandments' can have many meanings in general usage, how does the requirement that they be your commandments, the commandments of mere-'you' (as opposed to commandments of our ego) affect our understanding of the term? What can be included in and what is excluded from the Torah of mere-'you' or the saving help of mere-'you'?

“You are powerful,” in the second person, I do not assert the existence of any entity, nor do I claim knowledge about any entity; I am not making a claim about a detached state of affairs “out there.”³³ I simply acknowledge my situation, in which I stand before ____ in a relation of powerfulness. In this description, the ____ must remain unfilled, since the saying of ‘you’ cannot be translated to the third- person. In prayer, I can say, “I stand before you in a relation of powerfulness,” but the quotation marks cannot be removed. Thus, if someone else heard me say in prayer, “You are powerful,” and that person asked me, “Who were you speaking to? Who is powerful?” I could not answer—I cannot say who is on the other end of the relation of powerfulness. This inability to say is not simply a matter of incommunicability—I myself do not know who is on the other end of the relation, since knowledge is also a third-person function that breaks the immediate relation to the ‘you.’ Because the ‘you’ is mere-‘you,’ merely second- person, there can be neither description-of nor knowledge-about. In a sense, I am simply saying, “Powerfulness, there,” or, “There (i.e. outside of me) is powerfulness-in-relation-to-me.” These have the advantage of emphasizing that there is no cognizable object or entity to which the powerfulness is attached, but, again, they are not fully adequate since the ‘you’ of address is lost in such formulations.

In the context of the Amidah, “*Ata gibor*” indicates the speaker’s trust in this relation of powerfulness. “You are powerful infinitely” is followed by a list of the other wondrous deeds that the addressee performs: “You lovingly sustain the live, you revive the dead with great mercy, you support the fallen, you heal the sick, you free the fettered, you keep your faith with those who sleep in dust.” Thus, “You are powerful infinitely,” has the sense of “For you, all things are possible.” Again, this should not

³³ Because prayer involves an address to the mere-‘you’, to the absolutely other, it makes sense that people would be inclined to say that it involves an address to someone or something “out there,” other than myself. However, the ‘otherness’ in prayer is not objective or detached; it is dependent on the relation of address, and hence third-person terms such as “someone” or “something” are misleading. Thus, paradoxically, one could say that the addressee in prayer is both “most other” (as absolutely other) and the “least other” (as completely lacking objective otherness).

be taken as saying “there exists an entity for whom all things are possible,” but simply that when addressing mere-‘you,’ I stand in a relation to infinite possibility.³⁴ This is different from asserting as a general proposition that all things are possible; I am only able to be aware of and acknowledge the infinite possibility *while* (or to the extent that) I stand in relation to the mere-‘you’. It is the address to the mere-‘you’ that brings about the situation of my standing before infinite possibility—the ability to say mere-‘you’ is one and the same as the awareness of standing before infinite possibility.³⁵ In uttering such a statement, I thereby affirm my commitment to maintain hope and shun despair.

Here, it is important to note the difference between saying “You are powerful” to the mere-‘you’ and saying the same thing to a human being. When one human being bows down to another and acclaims the second as powerful, this creates a hierarchical structure that leads to the comparative lowering and degradation of the less powerful individual. The act of submission before another human being undermines the principle of human equality and curtails the freedom of the one who submits. In contrast, the acknowledgement of power in addressing the mere-‘you’ does not debase or lower the one who does so; such degradation occurs only when there is a more powerful *objector entity* to which the human being is negatively compared. Rather, acknowledging the mere-‘you’ as all-powerful raises up the one who does so, resulting in increased freedom and possibility. The meaning of ‘powerful’ (or more precisely, the effect of addressing someone as powerful) is thus completely reversed in the case of ‘you’-alone.

³⁴ Because one does not know the origin of the possibility (since one does not ‘know’ the ‘you’-alone), to say that “it comes from God” can be misleading. In an important sense, the presence of the possibility is a mystery.

³⁵ Cf. Kierkegaard’s comment in *The Sickness Unto Death*: “[S]ince everything is possible for God, then God is this—that everything is possible.” Kierkegaard’s odd grammar also seems geared to avoid portraying God as an object or thing rather than in terms of a relation. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.40.

However, we must also keep in mind that this reversal occurs only when the 'you' spoken in prayer is uttered as 'you'-alone. If conceptualizations attach to the 'you,' the address is no longer mere address, and the addressee has become an object. As a result, submission before this 'you' *will* have the effect of degrading and limiting the freedom of the one who submits.³⁶ This form of submission has much in common with submission before another human being, although in this case the person debases himself before a projection of his own imagination.³⁷ This dynamic can serve as a litmus test for healthy or unhealthy prayer: to the extent the saying of 'you' in prayer results in increased freedom and vitality, that saying of 'you' is likely to be nearer to a saying of 'you'-alone. Conversely, to the extent the saying of 'you' results in degradation, it is likely that the speaker is addressing herself to an objectified pseudo-'you.' This state of affairs can also illuminate the objections of people who reject the idea of "praying to God" on the grounds that it seems to involve assumptions about a dubious entity for which there is little supporting evidence. In an important sense, their objections are correct, since no entity or object (real or imagined) should be part of saying 'you'-alone; there should only be relation.³⁸ Likewise, we are obliged to raise doubts concerning people who characterize their own activity as "praying to God." It may be that in actual practice they *do* say 'you'-alone, and their report is basically an attempted translation into descriptive language. Or, it may be that the third-person description is a manifestation and reflection of an objectified and unhealthy relation in their saying of 'you.'³⁹

³⁶ In other cases of a person's own concepts adhering to the 'you'-alone, the result maybe the opposite: egoistic self-aggrandizement. Both forms, arrogance and debasement, result from an objectifying deviation from the 'you' of sheer address.

³⁷ This portrayal has echoes of Ludwig Feuerbach's account of religion in *The Essence of Christianity*. However, the "projection theory" that I present applies only to the extent that the 'you' that is said is not 'you'-alone.

³⁸ Again, no answer can be given to the questions, "Relation to what? Relation to whom?" The saying of 'you'-alone is not "relation to nothing," nor is it "relation to something," as both of these are third-person terms. It is relation to _____.

³⁹ Accordingly, we may raise the general problem of whether speaking about "God" or being taught about "God" tends to create a concept in a person's mind that in turn becomes the

Both possibilities should be kept in mind when assessing a given individual's creedal or confessional self-portrayal.

These considerations can also be applied to the authors and editors of the traditional Jewish liturgy. I have argued that the 'you' of prayer ought to be understood as 'you'-alone, a 'you' of sheer relation. This 'you'-alone in turn shapes and restricts the proper understanding of the predicates found in rabbinic prayers. However, we cannot be certain that the original authors/editors had the 'you'-alone in mind when they composed and selected their predications and descriptions; a more objectified 'you' (perhaps influenced by, e.g., sexist, ethnocentric, or superstitious attitudes) may have guided some of their choices. In what ways should this possibility inform our contemporary approach to the traditional prayers? On the one hand, it could be argued that the original intent does not matter. Even if "You are powerful infinitely" was composed with a partially distorted 'you,' the same formulation can still be used in the saying of 'you'-alone. In this way, the words transcend the human fallibilities of their authors. It may even be the case that some of the most deficient original intentions can produce some of the deepest truths when reinterpreted in light of the 'you'-alone. On the other hand, certain formulations may prove more resistant to attempts at reinterpretation. Depending on the audience, certain undesirable interpretations may present themselves so forcefully that saying 'you'-alone in connection with such formulations is all but impossible.

Furthermore, even when reinterpretation is *theoretically* possible, certain formulations may more often have the practical consequence of creating or reinforcing objectified or distorted conceptions. While one should not over-hastily dismiss the words of prayer simply because of their imperfect human origins, it is also irresponsible to ignore the words' actual typical effects simply because an esoteric or erudite interpretation

objectified god that the person serves. When does speaking and/or learning about "God" aid the saying of 'you'-alone, and when does it hinder the saying of 'you'-alone? An empirical study of the practical effects of different modes and methods of religious speech would be useful for answering these questions.

is capable of recovering a more positive meaning. This caution applies even if we regard the words of prayer as originating in an undistorted or divine source: though their ‘true meaning’ may be godly, one must not forget that their effect on us imperfect humans can easily be dangerous or harmful.

Ethicizing and restorative effects of the ‘you’ of prayer.

I now want to briefly discuss some of the broader ethical implications of the saying of mere-‘you’ in prayer. Often, treating other human beings as persons can prove challenging. Instead of relating to others according to their common humanity, we view them prejudicially in terms of their skin color, ethnic group, gender, nationality, or countless other particularities; as a result, the other person becomes an ‘it’ rather than a ‘you.’⁴⁰ Even if we use the word ‘you’ in addressing another human being, the relation may still be objectified; it is possible to pronounce “you” without truly saying ‘you.’⁴¹ In the face of this predicament, I suggest that prayer can function as a form of practice in saying ‘you.’ If I can learn to say ‘you’ in the absence of specifying details, this skill can help me focus on addressing a fellow human being as ‘you’ without being sidetracked or led astray by his or her specific particularities.⁴² The mere-‘you’ of prayer, when transferred to the human realm, becomes the ethical ‘you’ of true personal relation. If a person can address the *absolutely* other, then the contingently other is like a brother in comparison.⁴³ As usual, the converse

⁴⁰ Such particularities should not be ignored or blurred away, but at the same time they ought not to prevent my relating to another person as ‘you.’ Indeed, it may be that a true ‘you’ can only be said when I first acknowledge the particularities and differences and then say ‘you.’

⁴¹ As noted above, this also a possibility when speaking the word “you” in prayer.

⁴² In fact, the very absence of distracting specifying features can potentially make the ‘you’-saying of prayer easier (at least in certain ways) than ‘you’-saying to a human. However, the ‘you’-saying of prayer could also be more difficult, since an addressee with no concrete features can more easily be displaced by fanciful projections. In either case, whether it is easier or more difficult, the skill of ‘you’-saying in prayer can still aid in breaking through particularities to reach the ‘you’ of another human being.

⁴³ Cf. Andrew Greeley’s sociological study entitled “The Pragmatics of Prayer,” in which he presents the following as one of his initial hypotheses to be tested: “Intense and benign

also holds: if my saying 'you' in prayer does not lead to my being able to say 'you' to other human beings, the 'you' that I address in prayer is not the mere-'you.'⁴⁴

In a similar manner, the practice in saying 'you' that enables a person to treat others as human can also develop and enhance the freedom and humanity of one who says 'you.' While anyone can vocalize the sound of "you," only an I can truly say 'you'-alone—hence, to be able to say 'you' is to be truly human.

Through engagement in the task of learning to say 'you'-alone, an individual becomes more and more an I, a free ethical agent who can speak and act.⁴⁵ Although saying 'you'-alone is an ideal and not fully achievable in actuality—hence, we can never completely become an I—we can and must persist in striving towards this goal. One need not view this a setback or flaw; rather, it provides us with the opportunity to continually deepen our humanness through the continuing task of saying 'you'.

relations with the Transcendent Other, as measured by frequent prayer and benign images of God, will tend to correlate with benign relationships with the contingent intimate other—the self, the spouse, the family—and the distant other—the condemned criminal and the AIDS victim." According to Greeley, his data confirmed this hypothesis, although the strength of the correlation depended on the praying subject's image of God (e.g. as "Master" vs. as "Spouse). Another of his initial hypotheses was the following: "It will be the experience of prayer itself and not formal doctrinal position on the existence of God that will be decisive for the effect mentioned in the previous paragraph." This hypothesis was confirmed by his data as well, a result that meshes well with my account of the 'you'-alone: the closer a person comes to saying 'you'-alone in a strictly second-person address, the more will doctrinal positions, which fall under the category of third-person conceptualizations, fade in significance. See Andrew M. Greeley, "The Pragmatics of Prayer," in *Religion as Poetry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), p. 159.

⁴⁴ A similar implication is that if the 'you' that I address in prayer is not mere-'you', my inclination and ability to say 'you' to other human beings will be lessened and impaired. That is to say, worship of or love for the one who is addressed as mere-'you' will not compete with but rather strengthen my love for other human beings, but worship of and devotion to a "divine" addressee that is not mere-you will compete with and commandeer energy that might otherwise be channeled into my love of other humans.

⁴⁵ That the same practice can aid in both processes is not surprising, since becoming human, and becoming able to treat others as human cannot be sharply distinguished from one another. One might say that treating others as human is the very definition of being human.

In light of this human task of becoming and remaining human, we can draw a connection the third-person descriptive statement "Saying 'you' preserves the 'me'" with the second-person addressive prayer utterance "You preserve me." In the context of the rabbinic liturgy, one may apply this insight to the statement "*Mechaye metim ata rav l'hoshia*," "You revive the dead; great is your saving power" (296). We could render "*mechaye metim ata*" as "'You' revives the dead": the saying of 'you' in prayer and the ability or willingness to say 'you' can restore the 'I'-ness, the dialogical selfhood, of one who had become inwardly deadened.⁴⁶ Furthermore, since the 'you' of prayer correlates with the 'you' of ethical relation, "*mechaye metim ata*" can be read as implying that saying 'you' to other human beings can also resuscitate the speaker's humanity. 'You' (the saying of 'you') has great saving power generally, in both prayer and human relations, no matter who the addressee is.⁴⁷

While this account highlights ways in which addressive prayer could shape a person's ethical and existential capacities, it may also sound as though it has removed God's agency from the matter. After all, I have elaborated on the effects of the *human* act of saying 'you', but doesn't the plain sense of the prayer text seem to emphasize *God's* action and *God's* power to give life to the dead? In response, I contend that while human will alone can easily utter the sound, "you," the act of actually saying 'you' in the sense of mere-'you' requires an element of grace. If I am revived by becoming able to say 'you' in prayer and in human relations, this process is not solely my own doing. The line between opening myself to saying 'you' and being opened to saying 'you' is not a clear one. Thus, "saying

⁴⁶ We might also say that the very utterance of "*mehaye metim ata*," "You revive the dead," revives the dead (as it were). Thus, the voicing of/the ability to voice the prayer brings about/constitutes its own fulfillment. This is not to exclude the possibility of relating "*mehaye metim ata*" to the traditional idea of bodily resurrection in the world to come. Rather, my main intention is to emphasize that such an utterance can also have effects in the here and now.

⁴⁷ In addition, we could also read "*mechaye metim ata*," "'you' revives the dead" as indicating that the hearing of 'you' also revives one who is dead. In other words, being addressed and related to as a 'you' can revive and restore a person who had previously been treated as an 'it.'

'you' revives the dead" (a formulation in which the act of human speech seems to bring about the revival) cannot be sharply distinguished from "you revive the dead" (in which the addressee is more clearly identified as the agent of revival).

Indeed, the rabbinic liturgy seems quite aware of this ambiguity, as the preface to the Amidah indicates: "*Adonai sefatai tiftach u'fi yagid tehilatecha*," "My lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise." Here, the speaker asks for help in order to declare "your praise," the praise of 'you', of mere-'you'. Without outside assistance, it appears, such a declaration would not be possible. This seems to answer the question of agency in favor of the addressee. Yet, paradoxically, the speaker must already be able to say mere-'you' in order to be able to request such help; otherwise, she would not be able to specify that it is 'your' praise that she wishes to declare. Thus, even here, the question of will versus grace, of whether the act as well as the efficacy of prayer are products of the human or of the divine realm, remains ultimately unresolvable.⁴⁸

In the foregoing discussion, taking the observed anomalous deixis of 'you' in prayer as a starting point, we have drawn out a number of varied implications and illustrations. Potentially, these could prove useful in reading afresh the work of religious writers and thinkers from the past, under the assumption that some of their third-person formulations and

⁴⁸ The richness and complexity of this preface to the Amidah can extend even further. *Adonai sefatai tiftach*—if you will open my lips, if you will open the lips-of-'I', if you will transform my present lips into the lips of an I, into the lips that can say 'you'—*u'fi yagid tehilatecha*—then my mouth, which will have become the mouth-of-'I', the mouth of an I, will declare your praise, will declare the praise of 'you', will declare your praise by saying 'you.' And then, since 'you' can be both the 'you' of prayer and the ethical 'you': To say 'you', to address other human beings by saying 'you,' to truly treat them as human beings, is the highest possible praise of the divine you. The mouth of an 'I' will declare your praise: even the least eloquent words, if they come from the mouth of an 'I,' if they are spoken in a genuinely human manner, inherently praise you.

descriptions may have their origins in acts of second-person address. In addition, the idea that prayer is addressed simply to 'you,' to 'you'-alone (in contrast to describing or conceiving of it as an address to 'God') could potentially reconfigure the battle lines of some contemporary philosophical and theological divides and disputes. Finally, some of the interpretations offered here may provide practitioners, anti-practitioners, and those in between with a new and perhaps helpful way of approaching problematic texts in the traditional Jewish liturgy.