



December 2007

"On a word and a prayer": Education, Prayer, and the Affirmation of Faith

Claire Katz
Texas A & M

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



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Katz, Claire. "'On a word and a prayer": Education, Prayer, and the Affirmation of Faith." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 5, no. 1 (2007): 125-148. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr/vol5/iss1/10>

This General 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.

“ON A WORD AND A PRAYER”: EDUCATION, PRAYER, AND THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

CLAIRE KATZ

Texas A&M University

*“Baruch ata Adonai, eloheinu melech ha’olam asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav
v’tzivanu la’asok b’divrei Torah.”*

“Praised are You, Adonai, Our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has made us holy with commandments and commanded us to engage in the study of Torah.”

(Prayer for Torah study)

“Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad.”

“Hear, Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

(Deuteronomy 6:4)

“I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation [under God], indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

(Francis Bellamy 1893, with changes made in 1926 and 1954)”

“To adore the Lord God is not to shy away from humanity, a humanity that is unique and united, a humanity towards which eternal thought leans (*se penche*) and to which it pours out its heart (*se penche*).”

(Emmanuel Levinas, “Education and Prayer,” *Difficult Freedom*, 270)

In October 2006, I volunteered in my daughter's kindergarten class for a Fall Festival. I arrived early in the morning, at the start of the school day. Although I have taught in a variety of K-12 classrooms over the past twenty years, I have not been present for the start of the school day since I was a high school student. As is the case in almost all public schools across the country, my daughter and her classmates began their day by communally reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. To say I was struck by this event would be an understatement. As I watched them recite these words in unison, words I knew they did not understand, I was not overcome with feelings of pride, nor did this recitation make me feel especially patriotic; I did not feel warm and fuzzy. Instead, I was horrified. My first thought was to wonder if they would ever know what these words mean? Would the pledge ever become a text that they examined and came to understand? Would they understand what they were affirming? If they did, would they be as willing to recite this pledge? My thoughts also drifted to the razor's edge of teaching children: how easy it is to teach them to be critical and questioning leaders, but just as easy to teach them to be mindless followers.

In November of that same year I revealed my own ambivalence with regard to the above question when a colleague asked me why my daughter's recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance horrifies me but her recitation of the Shema does not. I had to admit that I was not sure of the answer. I was still thinking about this question in February 2007 when I came across a letter to the editor in the *New York Times Book Review* in which the letter writer takes a book reviewer to task for referring to the Shema as the central prayer in Judaism. The dispute for this writer was not the centrality of the Shema. Instead, the writer questioned if the Shema can be considered a prayer at all. The author of the letter drew a distinction between an affirmation of faith and a prayer, and he claimed that the Shema is the former, not the latter. I thought of my friend's question and my response to my visit to my daughter's kindergarten class in light of the controversy raised by the letter writer and the questions about the status of the Shema that emerged from this exchange. I had no choice but to think

about the ways that the Shema and the Pledge of Allegiance are similar and different.

Like the Shema, the American pledge of allegiance is also difficult to classify. For some, the pledge is simply an oath, an affirmation of one’s loyalty to the country in which they live. For others, the inclusion of the phrase “under God” converts it into a form of prayer. Even if we temporarily suspend the question of the status of the pledge and we accept that it is simply an oath or loyalty pledge, we nonetheless must ask after the loyalty that children are swearing to uphold. Is pledging one’s allegiance at the age of 5 or 6 to a flag, a country, or even a set of principles implied by those symbols, the equivalent to affirming God’s uniqueness at the same young age? If so, is the latter as potentially problematic as the former?

In this essay, I examine the status of these two “oaths.” This essay addresses several central questions, but most specifically, it examines the status of the American pledge of allegiance: is it a form of prayer and if so, what does this mean for all children who are asked to recite it on a daily basis?¹ Can one recite the American pledge and be Catholic, Episcopalian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim?² In spite of claims to the contrary, the public

¹ Other questions that emerge from this discussion include the following: Is the American pledge simply an affirmation of faith? If so, what does that mean? What are the implications of this pledge? What is it that is being affirmed? What does it mean to affirm something? If it is not *simply* an affirmation, then is it also a form of prayer attempting to be cloaked in secularism? If the latter, what does this mean for all the children attending public schools and reciting this pledge? What does it mean to recite this pledge in a private school?

² Or even a Texan? On June 15, 2007, the Texas legislature ruled to add the phrase “One state under God” to the Texas pledge, which all students in Texas public schools are required to recite, in addition to being required to recite the pledge to the American flag. See, Melanie Markley, “Students must remember ‘God’ in Texas pledge,” *Houston Chronicle*, Aug. 2, 2007. <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/front/5020241.html>. Certainly one can imagine a conflict that would arise between loyalty to an individual state and loyalty to the country. For example, the Civil War, a conflict that emphasized the tension between State’s rights and Federal Government, forced citizens to choose between loyalty to the state and loyalty to the country. The irony here is that Bellamy wrote the American Pledge of Allegiance as an attempt to heal the fractured nation and to think of the nation as unified indivisible. The

schools, or public schooling, subtly promotes a form of Protestant Christianity that functions as the dominant religion of the culture.³ We see this most clearly in the Pledge's inclusion and maintaining of the phrase "under God." This has the hegemonic effect of making the "otherness" of minority religions more apparent and thus explicitly excluded. Rather than argue that we should simply dispense with the pledge of allegiance, I instead ask us to consider what this particular pledge means and what it asks us to do. I then invite readers to consider what it would mean to fulfill the obligation of pledging one's allegiance as we are asked to do when reciting the American Pledge of Allegiance. I turn to the Jewish understanding of prayer as expressed by Emmanuel Levinas and Abraham Joshua Heschel and to interpretations of the Shema in order to examine these questions.

Let me say here a word about prayer. At root of these questions is the question of prayer itself what do we mean by the word prayer? Throughout this paper, it is a question that I am exploring, and I employ the word as it is used commonly for example, when people refer to prayer in schools, but do not specify what they mean by this term. That said, I am partial to the conception of prayer offered by Abraham Heschel and alluded to by Emmanuel Levinas where prayer is understood to be a way in which we comport ourselves, attune ourselves, and find ourselves in the presence of God. This will become clearer in the section of the paper that explores Levinas and Heschel.⁴

article cited above is particularly interesting since the reference to God was added just this year in 2007.

³ I say "functions" because regardless of the number of people who practice a form of Protestant Christianity or who identify as Protestant Christians. Protestant Christianity is frequently invoked, even if incorrectly, as the original religion of the United States for the founding fathers were Protestant. When this country is referred to as a Christian nation, a specific kind of Christianity is implied, and it usually does not include Catholicism.

⁴ I find that it is easier to say what prayer is not. When I am using prayer in its positive form as something that I am promoting, I do not intend by that term that prayer is asking for "stuff," whether that would be getting a new puppy, winning the lottery, having the health of a spouse or friend repaired. Prayer is not about making abortion go away or a war ending. Rather, I think of prayer in terms of one's mental attunement such that one can gain wisdom regarding one's own actions, or even the actions of others. How might one act or what might

“With Liberty and Justice for All”

Contrary to the way Americans might think about the Pledge of Allegiance (judged by the heated arguments that emerge when challenges to the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools arise), it was not a fundamental pledge at the time of the formation of this nation. In fact, the original version of it, which did not include the phrase “under God,” was written in the late 1800’s in the midst of the World’s Fair in Chicago.⁵ David Greenberg, in his June 2002 article posted on *Slate*,⁶ notes that, contrary to popular belief, the founding fathers were careful not to include

one do such that we might help bring a war to an end or help make abortion less of a need? Praying might help put us in the right frame of mind to reflect on the world and its fragility and think about how best to help it heal itself.

⁵ See Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City* (Vintage, 2004). Larson explains that the American Pledge of Allegiance was introduced, or inspired, by the events leading up to the Worlds Fair that took place in Chicago in 1892. Though patriotism inspired many to back the World’s Fair, with its promise to open in time to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus landing on American soil, Bellamy saw it as an opportunity to unite an injured and fractured country that had not yet recovered from the recent events of the Civil War. Additionally, he wanted to remind Americans of the droves of immigrants, the poor, and others living in this country. His Pledge of Allegiance was written with an emphasis on liberty and justice and an intent to unify.

⁶ David Greenberg, “The Pledge of Allegiance: Why we’re not one nation ‘under God,’” *Slate Magazine*. <http://www.slate.com/?id=2067499>. Updated Friday, June 28, 2002, at 4:39 PM ET. It is true that some other ‘founding documents’ do include explicit religious references. For instance:

“Whereas, it hath pleased Almighty God, the father of mercies, remarkably to assist and support the United States of America in their important struggle for liberty, against the long continued efforts of a powerful nation: it is the duty of all ranks to observe and thankfully acknowledge the interpositions of his Providence in their behalf. Through the whole of the contest, from its first rise to this time, the influence of Divine Providence may be clearly perceived (Thanksgiving Day Proclamation of October 26, 1781, 21:1074-1076)

See also Thanksgiving Day Proclamation of October 11, 1782, 23:647. *The Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, Gaillard Hunt, et. al., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937). However, given the fact that the founding fathers paid attention to religion elsewhere, their decision not to make the Constitution a religious document takes on even greater significance.

religion in the American Constitution, and the only mention of it is to preclude religious belief as a criterion for holding public office. Even if the founding fathers were Christian (a claim that is itself doubtful in the strict usage of this term see, for example, *The Jefferson Bible*), the United States Constitution is not a Christian document in particular, nor is it intended to be a religious document in general.

With the 1954 addition of the phrase “under God” to the American Pledge of Allegiance, the original intention of one’s loyalty to this country has been significantly altered. And the ritual of reciting this particular pledge on a daily basis in public, and some private, schools risks coercing children not only to believe in a God that is not theirs but also to understand their responsibility to the US Constitution in terms of a particular religion. The addition of this reference to God shifts the Pledge of Allegiance from simply a pledge of patriotism to implicitly and some would argue, explicitly including an affirmation of faith, the latter of which has no place in the public schools regardless of one’s religious beliefs.

The American Pledge was originally written in 1892 by the socialist Francis Bellamy for the occasion of the first celebration of Columbus Day. Originally not even including the reference to the United States, his intention was to emphasize unity, in spite of the tension between States’ rights and federal jurisdiction that gave rise to the Civil War. Additionally, the phrase, “liberty and justice for all” was intended to remind us of the need to balance equality and individual rights. The pledge itself is an extraordinary expression of patriotism not blind patriotism, but rather an occasion to recall how difficult it is to balance these tensions and that the United States continues to have a difficult task in balancing these varied needs in the interest of justice. The introduction of the reference to God not only raises questions regarding the introduction of religion into the public arena, it also detracts from the original complex intention by drawing our attention to a nation that is connected not only to God, but a

particular version of God (e.g., a monotheistic deity) rather than to our role as citizens of a nation in pursuit of justice for all its inhabitants.⁷

Certainly one could argue that the two points are in fact related. Some might argue that a nation under God *is* a nation in pursuit of justice, and others might even argue that the former is necessary for the latter. Others, for example, Levinas, might argue the inverse to be in pursuit of justice is to be in the presence of God. This latter formulation has its own problems, but it does not assume the belief in a deity in order to pursue justice. Yet, no matter how we understand the relationship between the divine and the pursuit of justice, the addition of the phrase "under God" raises problems. On the one hand, its inclusion marginalizes those who do not believe in God; on the other, it simply blurs, or muddies, the object of one's allegiance. We are left with a Pledge of Allegiance that functions like a secular prayer in that it is covertly more interested in affirming that we are a Godly nation rather than that we are a nation in pursuit of "liberty and justice for all" with or without God's help.

Greenberg also points out that the discussion that concluded with the inclusion of the phrase "under God," demonstrates clearly that the emphasis was to orient the Pledge of Allegiance in the direction of religion. The pledge, some thought, was indistinguishable from a pledge that might be said in the Soviet Union, at that time save for the reference to the United States. That is, Congress approved the addition of the phrase "under God" by being convinced that it was *as a nation under God* that the United States of America was distinguished from the former Soviet Union. The United States Constitution, including its Bill of Rights, and the Pledge's promise of "liberty and justice for all" were insufficient, or worse, irrelevant.

⁷ My point here is that the reference to God is clearly a single God. Beyond that, there is no description of God added. Although those who argued for its inclusion clearly intended this reference to be to the Christian God, there is nothing in the actual addition of the phrase that denotes a particular God. That said, the mere inclusion of this phrase, and the phrase that requests one's allegiance to a flag, raises questions for those who are commanded not to commit idolatry (Christians included).

Including the phrase, “one nation under God,” had the effect to subordinate the nation to God and thereby place greater emphasis on the role of God rather than on the nation as such. Yet again, we could certainly argue that with the addition of this phrase, those who pledge their allegiance now serve two masters, the nation and God, which presents problems of its own. The inclusion of this particular phrase implies that they are not separate; one’s allegiance is not to a nation and then also to God, but rather to a nation that is governed by God. “The republic for which it stands,” is a nation that comes under God’s sovereignty. Thus, contrary to what people commonly think, the inclusion of this phrase renders the American Pledge of Allegiance *un*-patriotic under even the crudest definition of patriotism. One’s allegiance is to God first and country second, and we cannot assume that serving the former serves the latter.⁸

However, and this is contrary to what people seem to think, the United States is not governed by God but by a set of documents, the most primary of which is the Constitution, a document that was written by people who recognized the danger of religious influence and who went to great lengths to ensure its governing power was divorced from religious authority. Thus, aside from the secular-religious debate regarding the Pledge (Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, oppose the Pledge on the basis of idolatry: pledging one’s allegiance to a flag) the very act of reciting this particular pledge has essentially become an unpatriotic act.

When my daughter recites this pledge, she pledges her allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands. The flag symbolizes a country a republic whose guiding document is self-corrective and whose primary principle is to ensure liberty and justice for all even as it has tremendous shortcomings. That is, explicit in the American pledge of allegiance is a pledge not only to the flag the

⁸ This distinction is not to be taken lightly nor dismissed as obvious. When John F. Kennedy ran for president, questions about his Catholicism, his allegiance to the Pope, and thus his ability to govern the country were called into question. Similar questions arose when Joseph Lieberman ran for Vice President. Thus, one cannot assume that a nation under God means that anyone believes that that nation will be served well by simply serving God.

symbol but also to the republic for which it stands. This republic is guided by the Constitution, and thus this pledge is a pledge to abide by the Constitution, which itself demands critical awareness and vigilance. This principle is an extraordinary thing to which one can pledge one’s allegiance. And it will take many long and difficult conversations to help my daughter grow into the mental sophistication that will enable her to understand this pledge.⁹ But this is precisely what education and parenting mean.

To pledge one’s allegiance to a flag, one nation *under god*, is a wholly different matter. If we are simply pledging our allegiance to a flag in order to affirm (or reaffirm) that we live in a Godly nation, rather than that we are committed to pursuing liberty and justice, we defy the Constitution not any individual amendment, but the entirety of the Constitution, the governing document of our country, which includes if not requires our ability and our willingness to be critical of it such that we always remain dedicated to the pursuit of justice. And here we will have blurred any obligations we might have as religious individuals (Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus) with our obligations as American citizens. Rather than being a hyper-patriotic act, the Pledge of Allegiance in its current form and in its current practice is profoundly unpatriotic. First, the current content of the Pledge of Allegiance asks us to pledge our allegiance to God over country. And second, there is no educational apparatus to engage the minds and bodies of the children who recite the pledge such that they will become participating citizens in a democracy committed to the pursuit of liberty and justice for all.

My horror, then, at watching my daughter pledge her allegiance to the flag, was not a reaction based solely on what seemed a mindless act, though I admit that this concerned me in the same way that her potential to blindly follow others might concern me. Instead, I realized that the

⁹ I recently had a conversation with my daughter, who is now almost 6, about the Pledge of Allegiance. She was trying to remember all the words and this led to a discussion about what the words mean. She had no idea, first and foremost, she had no idea what “allegiance” meant.

public school system has simply made my task as a parent more challenging. It will be a difficult enough task as a parent to explain to both of my daughters the conflict that may arise in the rub between State law and moral conscience. But if we elide the two, we wrongly assume that they are the same. We need look only to Sophocles, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Hebrew and Christian Bibles to be reminded that they are not.¹⁰ In so doing, however, we effectively dispense with this tension that I would argue is not only significant but also fundamental to the very structure of our nation. Moral conscience, with or without a religious basis, often asks us to violate State laws when they are not sufficient. How do I explain to my daughters that the law often fails and when that happens one is often required to do what one's moral conscience (not other little voices) dictates? And what do I tell her when she asks about her ethical duty as rooted in Judaism? Finally, this country includes and welcomes people of all faiths and non-faiths to become its citizens. When the Pledge of Allegiance is to a country under "God," this phrase is not innocuous. It means following rules that are particular to and dictated by that God. Thus, our tolerant and welcoming view of citizenship is threatened.

Teach These Things to Your Children

Similar to the relationship the American Pledge has to the formation of the United States, the Shema was not central at the formation of Judaism. Marc Brettler, professor of Biblical Studies at Brandeis, notes that the Shema is "of no particular significance within the Hebrew Bible." He remarks that it did "rise to prominence in the early post-biblical period, as we see from the Nash papyrus (2nd-1st cent)."¹¹ Elliot Dorff recalls that while all of the Shema is found in the Torah, the prayer itself is not biblical

¹⁰ Sophocles' *Antigone* clearly demonstrates the tension between religious obligation and State decree.

¹¹ Marc Brettler, commentary on the *Sh'ma*, in *Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries*, vol. 1, *The Sh'ma and Its Blessings*, edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), pp 87-88.

in origin. Rather it is a prayer created by the rabbis.¹² Why then did they choose these paragraphs and not others? Dorff claims that “[the rabbis] were convinced that these paragraphs articulated the heart of the Jewish faith. They say explicitly (M. Ber. 2:2) that the first paragraph proclaims the sovereignty of God; the second, the duty to obey the commandments; and the third, the obligation to heed the commandments specific to the daytime.”¹³ Yet, the third paragraph appears redundant. Why the obligation to heed the commandments specific to the daytime if the second paragraph of the Shema already requires one to obey the commandments without limitation?

The first two paragraphs remind us repeatedly to teach “them,” namely, the commandments, to our children. The first paragraph refers to belief that God is one; the second paragraph refers to following God’s commandments. Thus, when we recite the Shema, we both affirm ourselves as Jews in belief and practice and we pledge to teach these things to our children. Dorff’s interpretation of the third paragraph tracks the directions that are provided for “these words” and he concludes that the third paragraph is the commandment to set up the educational system “by which we are to remember these assertions of faith and these demands of action: we are to use tassels, an unusual dress, as a reminder system a communal string around our fingers, as it were” (Hoffman 89).

The Shema commands us to “Teach these things to our children.” Similar to the explicit command in the Passover story in the book of Exodus to teach this story to our children, the Shema also explicitly commands that it and thus a particular belief in God and God’s commandments be taught. As I also noted previously, Dorff explains that in the first paragraph, those verses that precede the command to teach “tell us to speak of our belief in one God and our duty to love and be loyal

¹² While the rabbis, as Dorff says, may have institutionalized the Shema in the particular form that we now have it, there are indications that other variants of the Shema were used in prayer before that. See, e.g., Paul Foster, “Why Did Matthew Get the Shema Wrong?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (SBL 2003, No.2: Summer 2003), 309-333.

¹³ Elliot Dorff, in *The Sh’ma and its Blessings*, 88-89.

to that one God” and in the second paragraph, the obligation to teach our children is preceded by the demand that we obey the commandments. Thus, there is a set of nested commands those that command us to be a certain way, and those that command us to teach our children to follow in a similar path. We must, then, “teach our children and affirm for ourselves both Jewish beliefs and practices” (89). In short, we must practice what we teach and teach what we practice. We must live as Jews and make an active effort to impart those beliefs and actions to our children. But here the Shema appears to double as both an affirmation of faith and a command or a pledge to teach these things to our children. That is, it is a command from God but it is also a pledge to teach these things to our children from those who recite the Shema.

Dorff’s most compelling comments emerge from his discussion of the apparent theodicy in the Shema. The emphasis on rewards and punishments for those who obey or disregard God’s commandments, respectively, does not sit well with those who take a more individualistic approach to responsibility. Additionally, the rewards and punishments simply do not ring true. As we know, those who are righteous often suffer and those who do evil often prosper. Although Dorff acknowledges the problems with a literal, and even symbolic meaning the path to prosperity is a communal endeavor and it means honoring the sacredness of all of God’s creation (Plaskow also makes this point) for Dorff, the meaning of the Shema lies more profoundly in acknowledging God’s justice, even if that justice remains a mystery to us. That is, like the Pledge of Allegiance and its own implicit reference to the Constitution, the Shema also asks us to pursue justice even if we fail, even if it seems that God has failed.

Thus, I am brought to my original questions. Why do I not recoil when my daughter learns to recite the Shema? Certainly one could ask if the Shema is potentially as dangerous as the Pledge of Allegiance. That is, one could ask if there is the same potential for the Shema to be recited robotically. Although we cannot rule out this possibility, there is one significant difference. Without critical reflection, the Pledge of Allegiance may at best be a brainless but innocuous act. Yet, at worst, it is an attempt at indoctrination or coercion into a set of beliefs that many do not share

and that I, in particular, find potentially dangerous. If the Pledge of Allegiance is oriented in such a way that the intention is simply to encourage one to be mindlessly loyal to this country, the result could be anything from uncritically thinking citizens to those who would do anything the country asks of them. Yet, even as this potential exists, the requirement to approach Jewish prayer with a particular kind of readiness appears to be an attempt to keep prayer thoughtful rather than mindless. The Shema, in particular, appears to require this readiness, since it asks that one love God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength. That is, one must approach God not in blind obedience, but as a thoughtful individual who is also ready to act. Emmanuel Levinas and Abraham Joshua Heschel make this point in their commentaries on prayer.

The Kavanah of Prayer

In his essay, “Education and Prayer,” Emmanuel Levinas explores the problem with prayer, particularly Jewish prayer, in a contemporary world.¹⁴ He begins by making two assertions: he maintains that prayer is central to Judaism, but, knowing this, he wishes to accord it a secondary position. In his discussion of Jewish prayer, he affirms that the centrality of community, which while still indispensable for its meaning, has nonetheless been lost from prayer itself. Levinas relays the fable from *Berakhot* where the Lord God is putting on his own tefillin each morning (270). Thus, the “celestial counterpart” to the Shema is “Who is like you O Israel, a nation unique on the earth?” We are unique to God just as God is unique to us. For Levinas, then, this exchange implies not a mutuality, but rather an affirmation of our own uniqueness and thus an affirmation of humanity. In Levinas’s view, essential to the Shema is not only the connection between God and Israel but also the one among the people of Israel themselves. That is, what Levinas “hears” in the Shema is a call to humanity that is both united and unique.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Education and Prayer” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Although prayer is often thought in terms of the individual, for Levinas prayer transcends the individual. It is what makes Judaism religious that is, it tethers us to our history and ties us to the community. According to Levinas, it is prayer that paved the way for Jewish nationalists. That is, it is in prayer that we are bound to Israel as a people and then as a nation. But in the ensuing paragraphs he takes a more circumspect look at the priority of prayer and asks what implications this has for the contemporary world and contemporary Jews. In this section of the essay, Levinas frankly asks after the role of prayer in the modern world. Although many would be tempted to criticize modernity, simply on the grounds that it pulls people away from the sacred and into the profane, Levinas does not take this position. Rather, he asks us to consider what the call of the modern world is and if there is a way for Judaism to respond to this call. He recognizes that many who have left the fold of Judaism are among the brightest and most active of humanity. Yet, they also believe that religion cannot provide salvation as long as “reason and justice are left unsatisfied” (271). Old -fashioned Judaism, as Levinas refers to it, is dying off. Thus, he calls for us to return to Jewish wisdom, but it must be the Jew of the Talmud rather than the Jew of the psalms. Reason, he asserts, must take precedence over prayer.

In the final paragraph of this essay, Levinas asks his readers to consider what really moves them with regard to Jewish truth. Where, he asks, do we find “the most dazzling confirmation of our truth?” And he replies that it is not found so much in the offices of the synagogue, but rather in those flashes of Talmudic genius and it is in this that we find our mark of being chosen (272). For Levinas, if we ignore this opportunity to bring Talmudic reason into the educational arena and to offer it a privileged status over prayer, thus drawing many Jews back to Judaism, “we risk ending up with a Judaism without Jews” (271). Judaism must respond to the modern world by recognizing the role of reason that is already a fundamental part of Judaism’s identity.

In a later essay, “On Religious Language and the Fear of God” (1994), dedicated to Paul Ricoeur, Levinas offers a reading of a passage from the

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berakhot* 33b.¹⁵ In this commentary, Levinas emphasizes the role of study in our relationship to God. This essay, written late in Levinas’s philosophical career, reflects many of the themes we find in his philosophical writing, though here these themes are applied to sacred texts rather than to the ethical other, per se. Early in this essay, Levinas sets out his task. He hopes to offer a “description of religious language which admittedly, in the last analysis, relates it fundamentally to a thought which is already a discourse (reading and studying the Torah) but which, between the Torah and the discourse allowing transcendence to signify, brings in attitudes of will as carriers of meaning, a discipline which is heteronomous to the point of depending on an educational community” (87). Torah and Talmud study are communal endeavors. Judaism calls us from outside of ourselves so outside that we are required to engage these texts with others. Towards the end of the essay, Levinas claims that the “The study of the Word of God thus establishes or constitutes the most direct relation to God, perhaps more direct than the liturgy. Hence the central place in Judaism of teaching in order to ensure the religiosity of religious discourse” (97). Thus, Judaism calls us from outside ourselves and it teaches us to engage with the other. One cannot help but ask if the implication of Levinas’s comment is to say that study is not only embedded in prayer; it is also in fact more religious than prayer.

We see indications of this point at the end of the essay when he recaps the problem with the three prohibitions or improper formulations of prayer as found in Tractate *Berakhot* 33b. His gloss, focusing on the third prohibition, the issue of repetition “We give thanks, we give thanks,” is worth reproducing at length:

The return to the ‘interdict of repeating’ is also an opportunity to insist, in concluding, on the idea of discipline, and consequently on the authoritative educational intervention of the community: to excuse the repetition of the formulations of prayer on the pretext of a possible first

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “On Religious Language and the Fear of God” in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

recitation being purely mechanical, and thus requiring a second recitation with a more concentrated thought, is to give a bad excuse. A purely mechanical recitation is carelessness. The fear and the love of God exclude such 'familiar' behavior. An education is needed, and that education can become a constraint. The constraint of the community or of tradition, which has been or, more exactly, can be the first word on which everything depends (97-98).

For Levinas, then, mindless recitation would not be an excuse for the second recitation, since the familiarity with God that would allow such a mindless act of prayer would be considered carelessness. That is, according to this commentary, prayer cannot by definition be simply rote or mindless, since it assumes a familiarity (not intimacy) with God, the Absolute Other, that we simply cannot assume. Thus prayer calls for education within a community that functions pedagogically.

Levinas's analysis in these two essays presents a dimension of prayer that is not normally discussed. Prayer is often presented as that which is outside of education, and even outside of reason. But in this essay, Levinas draws on themes from the earlier essay where prayer of the psalms was put in opposition to the reason of the Talmud. Here, Levinas argues that prayer must assume a certain comportment of the self in order for it to be authentic.

In his essay "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," Abraham Joshua Heschel sees a similar problem in modern Jewish life to the one that Levinas notes.¹⁶ Yet, for Heschel, it is not that education or study adds to prayer; rather, the very notion of prayer includes a particular mental disposition. As a result, he arrives at a different conclusion regarding the significance of prayer in our lives. Heschel begins his essay with the declaration that although services run smoothly, full of "pomp and precision decorum, voice, and ceremony," they are devoid of life. Ironically, the place of worship is lacking soul. Judaism has developed a new habit of "*praying by*

¹⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1996).

proxy" (101 emphasis in original), where the congregants "let" the rabbis or cantors do the praying for the congregation.

For Heschel, in order to know how to correct this problem, we must first know what prayer is, and in order to answer this question, we must first know who we are when we pray and what it is we are praying for. He asks, "What is it that a person is conscious of in a moment of prayer?" (108). This question is better understood in terms of the rabbinical expression, "Know before Whom you stand" (108). Though Levinas

sees the presence of God in the ethical relation, Heschel maintains that to live without prayer is live without God (108). It is to live without a soul (108). Like Levinas, however, Heschel argues against the position that prayer is simply emotion or emotive, though certainly emotion is a component of prayer. "Before Whom," makes reference to God and "You stand" refers to the *act* of prayer as an act that "happens between man and God in the presence of God" (109). To pray is to expose oneself to God, to enter into that relationship with God, to be in the presence of God (109).

Yet, this relationship with God does not remove us from this world; rather, prayer is how we "bring God back into the world" (110). And although prayer in Judaism can be either praise or petition, the former ranks foremost (110).¹⁷

In his discussion about the ways that prayer is regulated who can pray, when one can pray, and so forth. Heschel acknowledges the "perpetual danger of prayer becoming a mere habit, a mechanical performance, an exercise in repetitiousness" (111). He argues that we need to find a way to balance the regularity of prayer with spontaneity though he admits that this is a difficult problem to solve. He uses the comparison of the *halakhah* and the *aggadah*. Judaism needs both and they map onto the body and the spirit neither of which should be disparaged. Yet

¹⁷ There is much dispute regarding prayers of petition, and what petition actually means what is being petitioned. To some, petition is straightforward. It means asking God for things including to heal one's spouse or to become financially wealthy. For others, petition, in this context, means to ask for the strength to help one through a particular crisis; to seek wisdom or to seek moral courage to do the right thing. This latter form of petition mitigates against problems of theodicy that the former version introduces.

maintaining these polarities also keeps the tension between them present. How then does one approach the text with the proper *kavanah*? Citing Maimonides, he tells us that “Prayer without *kavanah* is no prayer at all” (112). And he refers to the same Talmudic passage that Levinas cites in order to impress upon us the significance of approaching prayer properly (114). The regularity of prayer and the laws that govern us move us into a position to pray, even when “we do not feel like doing so.” Most importantly, Heschel tells us that we pray in order to pray not for the sake of something else. Thus, there is a command to pray, a command to put ourselves into a proper frame of mind and body such that we can pray, such that we can be in the presence of God and such that we can continue to make commitments to God in good faith but we have lost the ability to know what words mean, to know that words have a soul. We do not know how to gain insight into that life.

Levinas wants to return Jewish education to the Talmud, to the wisdom of the Talmudic thinkers, since it is here that he thinks modern Jews will be able to respond to Judaism. Heschel, on the other hand, thinks that without prayer, Judaism will have lost its soul, it will have lost the very thing that commits us as Jews to the moral life that Judaism promotes. Like prayer in general, certainly the Shema has the potential to be recited with the thoughtlessness that both Heschel and Levinas note. Yet, even as this potential exists, Jewish prayer requires our “readiness.”¹⁸ That is, there are prayers or blessings that are said simply to ready oneself for saying the central prayers. It is difficult not to think of the repeated use of *hineni* in the Hebrew Bible most notably uttered by Noah and then Abraham in order to signal their readiness to serve. Thus the activity that

¹⁸ Let me also state here that without question, my own relationship to Judaism and its prayers is unorthodox both literally and figuratively. My unorthodox upbringing by two socially activist and intellectually minded grandparents informs my relationship to Judaism as a religion that at its heart promotes social justice, requires us to respond to those who are most needy among us, and encourages our minds to be critically engaged. That is, I understand Judaism as a relationship to God that mirrors precisely what one is asked when one recites the Sh’ma to approach it with all one’s mind, heart, and body. Thus, this engagement with Judaism, God, and the Sh’ma are neither mindless nor are they indicative of blind faith. Rather, this relationship requires one to be fully engaged.

is bounded by Jewish prayer reflects an instruction in readiness to prepare oneself to take on the activity or task set before them. This readiness is most interesting when it reflects the preparedness for study. Thus one is asked to approach a Jewish text in a certain frame of mind, to be prepared to study, to engage the Torah with all one's mind, heart, and body so to speak.

This is where the Shema and the Pledge of Allegiance intersect in an unexpected way. If we apply the analysis of the Shema to the Pledge of Allegiance, then we can ask what it means to frame the school day in terms of the American pledge. For those who recite the Shema, the day is framed in terms of thinking about God's uniqueness, and that it is God who delivered the Torah, the instruction in daily life. One first prepares oneself to recite the Shema, and then one recites it and the day is introduced. We might say that the beauty of the Shema lies not only in the commitment to God, but more importantly in a commitment to follow God's commandments, to be committed to justice. The Shema is not to be recited simply by rote. Rather, embedded in the command to recite the Shema is the command to love God with all one's mind and body, and strength, that is, as a whole person, a thinking, feeling, and acting person. To pursue justice, to follow God's commands, to live rightly means knowing what is asked of him or herself; it means critically and sensitively engaging with the text and the commandments. It means that a form of study is embedded in the act of prayer.

How does one prepare to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and how does this pledge prepare students for the school day? We could say that the Pledge of Allegiance asks one to make a commitment to the nation whose governing documents seek justice for all its inhabitants. But, that said, we have two problems. The first is the addition of the phrase, "under God." On the one hand, this addition appears to elide Godly justice with secular justice, which is dubious at best. On the other hand, and more subversively, we could argue that national justice is subordinated to Godly justice, thus paving the way for a constitutional legitimization of civil disobedience. Although the latter is tempting, the inclusion of the phrase "under God" is simply too problematic for a country that is guided

by democratic principles and the necessity to separate religious beliefs from participation as a citizenship. What are we saying about the approach to education if children's preparedness for the school day is to think of their public schooling as part of a state apparatus that sees itself in terms of one nation under God? While my phrasing of this point is complicated, the point itself is not. Even very young children begin to understand themselves and others in terms of who celebrates Christmas and who does not; who goes to Church and who does not; and so forth. It is certainly not the case that children are unaware of these differences in belief and practice, even if they are not sophisticated enough to understand what these differences mean. To reinforce that the nation is a Godly nation encourages children, from the beginning of their formal education, to raise the specter that some children are citizens of this country and others are not worthy of that citizenship.

The second problem emerges from the mindlessness with which the Pledge of Allegiance is recited. As we see in Hannah Arendt's essay, "On Civil Disobedience," the U.S. Constitution provides for its own justification of civil disobedience. In this landmark essay, Arendt recalls that laws are deemed unconstitutional only by challenging them. There is nothing in the law itself that seeks this challenge and there is nothing fundamental to any individual law that can determine this unconstitutionality. Thus, as citizens we are actually compelled, morally and legally, to maintain the constitutionality of laws by being vigilant toward them, by critically examining them, by challenging them, and by disobeying them when called to do so. In order to do this, the population must be educated. Thus, rather than think in terms of discarding the pledge of allegiance, I would suggest that we ask the school system to rise to the task set before it when it includes the pledge in its start of its day. The school needs to "prepare" or "ready" students for the day. That is, the school system needs to rise to the challenge to educate the children in its charge to be able to understand the pledge in its fullest sense and to be able not only to intellectually challenge the laws they encounter but also to develop the disposition to do so. Thus, those who endorse keeping the pledge of allegiance in school classrooms might take their cue from the

Jewish call to prayer and think about what it means to “ready oneself” for the Pledge and for the school day.

The problem, however, is that this kind of critical disposition is not intended, encouraged, or nurtured. There is no set of practices that coincides with the learning of the pledge the way there is with the recitation of the Shema. For example, it is not enough simply to recite the Shema. If one is observant, one wears *tefillin*. Families observe the Sabbath or may participate in other opportunities for perform mitzvot. The command to follow the commandments, to think of God a certain way, and to teach these things to our children frames or informs the way one approaches the Shema. Thus, even young children who might not fully understand the words or meaning of the Shema are encouraged or taught to act in certain ways that mirror that meaning. Thus, practice informs knowledge doing and then hearing, but one is not without the other.

The recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance orders the day differently. By and large, children do not participate in democratic practices during the course of their school day. Nor are they encouraged to think critically in such a way that their minds will develop as questioning minds. In fact, there is very little in the educational curriculum that reflects the nurturing of a citizen who will participate in a democracy. Instead, as I mentioned previously, the recitation of the Pledge as it is now formulated requires children first to think of the nation in which they are citizens to be understood as a nation under God one nation under [one] God (God is not in the plural), thus excluding all who do not believe in this kind of God.¹⁹ The framing or bounding of the school day, rather than being a dedication to the principles of liberty and justice for all, is instead an exercise in

¹⁹ Yet even if this were a nation of only Judeo-Christian believers, the recitation of this pledge, with or without the phrase “one nation under God,” would remain problematic. In their essay, “The Pledge of Allegiance and the Meanings and Limits of Civil Religion,” Grace Kao and Jerome Copulsky outline the problems with a compulsory and public approach to the pledge of allegiance in American public schools. Grace Y. Kao and Jerome E. Copulsky, “The Pledge of Allegiance and the Meanings and Limits of Civil Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 75/No. 1 (March 2007), 121-149.

exclusion under whose God? and mindlessness, since nearly all children at this young age have no idea what words they are saying, much less what they mean. We can all tell stories that repeat the funny ways in which various phrases from the pledge of allegiance are recited by children.

If we think about why it is important to be ready, then what does it mean that the beginning of the school day, the beginning of the day that is intended for education, is a mindless pledge? In this manner, the “readying” of children for the day consists not of critical reasoning, of thoughtfulness about the principles of a democratic society, or about the otherness of its citizens. And thus, the statement we then make about the purpose of public education is sad indeed. We have said that what is most important before beginning the process of study is to numb the mind and in effect to suspend the qualities of a democratic society in the course of learning. The framing of the school day and its curriculum is bounded by a context of nationalism and a very specific kind of nationalism at that; it is not for the education of a democratic citizen who will participate in a cosmopolitan society. Rather, it is for the “development” of a citizen who will be uncritically devoted to the State.

Certainly, it is the case that the Shema, and any prayer, could be said by rote without meaning or thoughtfulness. And I do not mean to suggest that all who recite the Shema are thoughtful people; nor do I mean to suggest that all who recite the Pledge turn out to be hyper-loyal automatons. As noted above, this mechanistic approach to prayer is the “crisis” of Judaism that Heschel notes. My point, however, is not about the actual practice of Judaism nor the actual recitation of individual prayers. My point is a theoretical one about the nature of education and the implied structure of Jewish liturgy.

The existence of the Pledge of Allegiance in its current form the words it contains and the pedagogical relationship it has to the schools (to be recited without any inkling that its meaning will be part of a larger philosophical discussion) is a signal that public schooling does not have as its goal the production of thinking citizens of a democracy. Although individual teachers may handle this situation differently, the overall structure indicates that certain values namely, a Godly nation and an

unquestioning patriotism are primary while the others I mentioned above are secondary. The relationship that the Shema has to Judaism is the inverse of the Pledge. While it may be the case that certain individuals and even individual families approach the Shema in a "thought-less" manner, Judaism's requirement to approach prayer with a particular readiness cultivates a more thoughtful person, a more critically engaged person, a person who approaches Judaism, and therefore their entire life (each individual day included), with all one's heart, mind, and body.

Conclusion

Though it is common to think of the Shema as an affirmation of faith, it seems more controversial to consider it a prayer, even if we acknowledge that it is a central part of the prayer service. If we grant that it is a prayer though it is neither petition, nor praise, nor thanks what might it mean to think of the Pledge in similar terms? My point is not to make the Pledge of Allegiance something pious; rather, my point is to say that for similar reasons we ought to approach it with the *kavanah* that Heschel and Levinas discuss.

While regardless of how we come to think of the status of the American Pledge of Allegiance, I would still maintain that the phrase "under God," needs be removed. Yet, insofar as one is pledging one's allegiance to a Republic that stands for liberty and justice and whose guiding document is the constitution we have built into the very pledge itself the justification for one to answer to a higher moral law and to adhere to one's own conscience. That is, to pledge one's allegiance to this Republic, guided by these documents, is in essence, to pledge to follow one's conscience, to do the morally right thing, and to love this country enough to help it realize this justice within its own boundaries.

Prayer in public schooling raises all kinds of questions and concerns, not the least of which is that some people simply do not pray. While some might be called to prayer in public school simply because their religion requires it, school led prayer or organized prayer of any kind within the context of a public school is not only inappropriate in light of the goals of

public education to serve the public, which includes all sorts of people. It also seems a recipe to enable some to exclude others on the basis of who does and who does not pray and to whom they do pray. Like prayer, the pledge of allegiance has the potential to undermine many of the goals of public school. The public nature of the recitation serves to put children in a difficult social, moral, and political position when they might not be of an age or mental development to make all, or even any, of these choices. Yet, if we were to think of the Pledge of Allegiance not as a prayer but, in the context of Jewish prayer, as preparation, we might have a different relationship to it. If we were to think about what we need to do to prepare ourselves to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to put deliberative democracy into practice, to let other voices be heard, to be cognizant of the tyranny of the majority and how this recitation will prepare us for the rest of the school day as democratic citizens in the pursuit of liberty and justice for all, now that might be an exercise even a prayer worth considering.