

Talmud (study) consists of the Mishnah (original text or law) and gemara, completion of the text. We emphasize the term Talmud (study) because it indicates that Mishnah and Gemara are part of a larger process of expansion of meaning that is fostered by sacred argument. In this selection, Eric Caplan provides the original Mishnah and Catherine and Jeremy the Gemara in response. Our readers are invited to serve as tosafists, commentators suggesting other points of view.

Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz:

An act of quotation I would like to argue that “quotational prayer” is neither necessary nor sufficient. Quotational services are not necessary because, on the one hand, most of the traditional liturgy actually can be revalued. Is it intellectually dishonest or ethically liturgy actually can be revalued.

Is it intellectually dishonest or ethically dangerous to understand the divine “You” in a Buberian or Levinasian sense, as *That Which Faces Us?* The address to “You” acknowledges that there is something outside ourselves that provides nearly everything we have and that, as we face it, demands our response. That certainly was something our ancestors meant by *“baruch atah,”* although they wouldn’t have conceived that something as a Reconstructionist might. On the other hand, quotational services are unnecessary because, in our generation, the absence of the traditional order of the service causes most Jews no sensation of rootlessness; Civilizational continuity does not require it.

Further, quotational prayer is not sufficient. Can we afford to devote our Jewish practice-time to quotation? When would we do the actual work of orienting ourselves to the divine call and receiving the benefit of divine inspiration? (Even if the traditional liturgy can be revalued, not merely quoted, it’s still not sufficient. We might be able to affirm what it says

but it doesn’t say what we most need to affirm. Jewish absence from the pews is good evidence that something new is needed.)

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Catherine Madsen:

Jewish Chosenness Kaplan recognized a poetic element in the liturgy, and Eisenstein called the liturgy an aesthetic experience, but they both did so rather casually and not as artistic practitioners. They knew the power of metaphorical language,

but did not understand the complex interplay of the aesthetic and the ethical that metaphor involves. They thought intellectual honesty could be served by excising improbable assertions and substituting language “which calls forth no mental resistance”; they did not understand mental resistance as one of the fundamental forces through which art and liturgy do their work.

Kol Haneshamah did not really solve a problem when it substituted *mehayey kol hay berahamim rabim* for *mehayey metim berahamin rabim*; to make an ideological point at the expense of a rhyme is, at the physical level, to concede defeat. Nor did Kaplan solve a problem by excising Jewish chosenness. Any student of anthropology will know that many hunter-gatherer societies call themselves, in their own languages, “the real people. They do this not to disparage those other hunter-gatherers across the river, but to commit themselves to the precepts and obligations and survival skills of their own tribe.” They consider that this work makes them

genuine. Chosenness has a similar function within the Jewish tribe. It intensifies the sense of peoplehood; it has value. What is gained by refusing to consider it? And what is lost?

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Dr. Eric Caplan, Revaluation and Transvaluation

PRAYER Kaplan claims that our historical sense makes it impossible to feel truly connected to the world of our ancestors if we “transvalue” Judaism: “ascrib[e] meanings to the traditional content...which could neither have been contemplated nor implied by the authors of that content.” Instead, we must learn to “revalue” tradition (editor’s note: this process is described in greater depth in Eric’s full article).

At the same time, Kaplan recognized that there was a poetic element to the liturgy and that it is not always possible to find words that “say what we mean.” This should never be used, however, to justify using language that says what we do not mean. Religion should strive, as much as possible, to be intellectually honest. If an idea needs to be transvalued to be acceptable, it is better to substitute it with a passage from the tradition “which calls forth no mental resistance.” Kaplan was sensitive to the inconsistency of espousing a naturalist conception of God but continuing to address God directly in prayer. Direct addresses of God are so prevalent within rabbinic prayer that to excise them completely would require a significant rewriting of the inherited text. *Accordingly, Kaplan argued that direct forms of divine address could be recited as “quotations from tradition.”*

JEWISH CHOSENNESS Judaism, says Kaplan, must help humanity abandon the idea that one nation is better than another. *But to make this contribution, it must first give up all pretensions to being chosen, superior, or of having exclusive possession of the keys to salvation; it must “eliminat[e] from its liturgy... all references to the doctrine of Israel as the chosen people.” Only when we have done so will we be able to demand of other religions that they make similar changes and thereby move humanity closer to a world where all people are viewed lovingly as brothers and sisters. [Read More...](#)*