

Architectural and Psychoanalytic Thoughts on Prayer

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Introduction

Over the last few years I have been fortunate to have a number of opportunities to design synagogue spaces and I have been fascinated by the physical aspects of these buildings as well as the phenomenological experience of communal prayer. Initially, I was perplexed by the seeming contradiction between prayer and community. I understood prayer as a private act in which one accessed her personal longings and hopes, regrets and gratitudes. Locating prayer within the shared space of a synagogue sanctuary seemed to suggest a very different experience, one of choreographed communal ritual positioning the praying individual within the context of belonging to a larger group. Could spiritual introspection or dialogue with the divine take place in a public setting? Would a communal environment obliterate these fragile moments?

I have come to understand communal prayer as a process that is similar to psychoanalysis. Analysis at its best can blur the borders of self and other, past and present, verbal and embodied, creating a shared intersubjective field, while at the same time respecting the sense of self and agency of the participants. Moreover, Analysis asserts that it is precisely through the transferential interaction with the other that one discovers his or her self. I suggest that an analogous process occurs in the transcendent moments of communal prayer when the intimate, intrapsychic spiritual experience of accessing longings, vulnerability and gratitude can co-exist within and because of the intersubjective experience of others and the shared rhythm of ritual. We are able to feel more when surrounded by a community of others, both those present in the room and those in the prayer texts.

What is Prayer?

I recently discovered a text titled [The Psychology of Prayer](#), written in 1909 as a PhD dissertation of the 23 year-old Anna Louise Strong. Strong later became a labor organizer, journalist and political radical, living

her last years in communist China. What took me by surprise was the contemporary, subjective, relational tone of Strong's words.

She writes:

"Self-consciousness is not attained at any given period in the history of either the race or the individual. Rather, as life goes on, we are continually attaining self-consciousness, and each time it is the consciousness of a slightly different self. This new self is not a self which (although we have indeed just come to the knowledge of it), has existed all along, deliberately choosing to enter into relations with other selves and coming out of them essentially unchanged. It is a self which became what it is as the result of the personal relation. It will enter into new relations and the result of those will be again another self. Thus it is (how) ~~that~~ a small and narrow self develops into a larger self, through what we call... "Imaginative Social Process....Prayer is one form, one very important form, of this imaginative social process."

(The Psychology of Prayer, p. 19-21).

Strong elaborates her idea that a self is always created in a process of interactions with the Other, or Alter as she calls it. She emphasizes that it is this ongoing transformation of self through other that promotes growth from a narrow self to a wider one.

It is interesting to compare Strong's view of prayer as an enlargement of self with Freud's text written roughly around the same time. In the Rat Man Case (1909, Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis) Freud sees the obsessional praying as an attempt to ward off aggressive impulses. The function of prayer is to restrict these impulses by repression. Slightly earlier, in 1907, Freud calls to our attention a "resemblance between what are called obsessive actions in the sufferers of nervous afflictions and the observances by means of which believers give expression to their piety" (1907, p. 117). Religious prohibitions are a defense against repressed sexual instincts that are always "lurking in the unconscious" (1907, p. 124). Freud therefore suggests that we see "neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis." Freud saw religion as an infantile defensive wish to be protected by the omnipotent God or father. He suggests that prayer was an impossible, illusory "attempt to master the sensory world in which we are situated by means of the wishful world which we have developed within us" (1933, p. 168).

But we might recall another aspect of religion mentioned in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Freud describes the oceanic feeling mentioned to him by his friend Roland: "It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'" (1930, p. 64) Freud compares this feeling, personally unfamiliar to him, to the feeling of being in love when the "the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away." (1930, p. 66).

Autonomous vs. Relational Self

While the differences between Strong and Freud's understanding of prayer might be categorized as theological I would like to suggest that they rest on a fundamentally different understanding of self and its relation to others.

Freud was a genius yet also a product of his own time and culture and nineteenth-century rationalism. He understood fantasies and desire as intra-psychic events, stemming from our biological makeup, "aims in search of objects". It was through his various followers, from Ferenczi to British Object Relations, that we arrived at an understanding of the centrality of relatedness to our human experiences and the development of the self.

God images also changed to reflect these developments. From Winnicott, who saw God as a maternal transitional object, to Guntrip, who suggested that God fulfilled the fundamental human need for a good internal object in order to have healthy interpersonal relationships. However, it is Laplanche (XXX) who makes the most daring analogy between sexuality and religion. Laplanche argues that Freud "went astray" when he replaced the theory of seduction, which includes the actions of a real adult other, as the cause of repression with a completely internal world of fantasies that generate the unconscious. Laplanche writes that: "The sexual enigma is presented to the child by adults in an address, and this address is enigmatic in so far as the other (the one who sends it) does not entirely know what he is saying: he is other to himself." (p. 228). Laplanche suggests that just as human sexuality is the result of an enigmatic parental message, so is religious revelation the result of an enigmatic message from God towards humans. The revelatory message creates spiritual longing for the lost God-object, a desire that can be seen as parallel to a sexual desire created as a result of the exclusion of the child from the primal scene.

Loewald

The relationship of psychoanalysis and religion has for the most part been fraught with suspicion. While speaking about Judaism my analyst once said: "Psychoanalysis is Judaism for people who cannot believe in God", following Freud's self proclamation as a "Godless Jew". He seemed utterly surprised when I, an affiliated practicing Jew, answered by saying "What makes you think that religious people believe in God?" we both laughed and I freely associated to a less complicated topic. But I would like to focus on the experience of prayer as a communal, culture of choreographed rituals rather than a system of theological belief and understanding of God.

Loewald provides an essential link. Although Freud discovered the powers of our unconscious, he remained committed to rational scientific understanding. He wishes to interpret dreams, find a resolution to the Oedipus complex, to explain the transference and sublimate instinctual drives transforming ids into egos. Loewald, though not parting with Freud, captured the vitality of the unconscious, the centrality of fantasy to the experience of being alive, the ever-present dialectic of unity and separateness from the world around us and those we love.

In one of his last lectures Loewald reflects on Freud's "Illusion" and "Civilization", and suggests that Roland's eternity is not a sense of everlastingness, of an un-ending time, but rather a state in which "the category of time does not apply...in the experience of eternity, time is abolished" (p. 570). "Neither the felt version nor the verbalized version, it seems to me, should be called an illusion. If we acknowledge the undifferentiating unconscious as a genuine mode of mentation..." (p. 571). Similarly, Loewald suggested that transference is not a distortion in which the patient projects his early structures of relating onto the analyst, rather it is a state in which some of the differentiations between self and other, past and present, dissolve enabling a more primary type of experience which connects the past childhood with the analytic experience. His notion of sublimation proposes a binding of id and ego experiences, a vitality that produces the work of art by combining different modes of mentation.

I suggest that prayer can simultaneously contain both experiences which Loewald described. The feeling of the self as contained and differentiated as well as an oceanic experience of connectedness and

timelessness. I will continue to suggest that it is the relational context of the communal space which facilitates the presence of these opposing experiences.

Contemporary Relational Psychoanalysis and Mentalization

Drawing on object relations and the interpersonal school, relational psychoanalysis posited a new way of understanding the human experience. Rather than the classic view of the patient's mind safely contained "independently and autonomously within the boundaries of the individual", Mitchell, Aron, Benjamin and others suggest a model of the mind as inherently social, interactive and interpersonal. Therapy is a mutual co-creation of the dyad, a two-way communication and shared enactment. The therapist, therefore, must pay close attention to the subtle ways in which patient and analyst influence, reflect and effect one another. The goal of analysis shifts from interpretation and lifting repression to a process that strives to widen the range of authentic experiences the patient can have, allowing the patient to tolerate their emotions, memories and desires. Psychic pain is a result of trauma that causes splitting off of parts of the self, and dissociation of affects too painful to feel. Dissociation and splitting restrict the patient's emotional abilities.

A similar understanding can be found in the work on Mentalization of Fonagy et al. Mentalization is the capacity to understand both our own minds and emotions as well as the minds and feelings of others as well as the capacity to regulate and tolerate these affects. The ability to mentalize develops through the child's secure attachment to mirroring caregiver. "Thus the self is not merely open to environmental influence: it is in part *constituted* through its interactions with the social environment." The analytic space is a secure framework in which the patient, through the mirroring of the analyst, learns to accept his own positive and negative affects and in so doing "allows the self to flourish" (Jurist, p. 107).

Feminist Theory and Art Criticism

This shift that re-positions the reflecting parent, the observing analyst and the critical art theorist as central participants in the creation of a self can also be traced in current feminist art criticism. No longer understood as passive, objective, uninvolved observers, building users participate in the creation of the artistic and spatial result. Starting from Linda Nochlin's ground-breaking article, "Why Were there no Great Women Artists?," in which she suggested that artists are formed through participation in organized

educational institutions, and followed by Bourdieu's "But Who Created the 'Creators'?", which expanded the creation of art to include the curator and critic, observed and observer, subject and object became ever more intertwined. Jane Rendell, in a wonderful book, *Site Writing* (2011), draws on Laplanche, who inverts the traditional view of art from a communication of the artists towards a receptive public (Kris) and suggests that it is an expectation of the public that provokes the artist's creative work. (Rendell, p. 9). Rendell's writing and installation work is a provocative experiment in the situated nature of the triangular dialogue of the art object, artists and critic.

The Architectural Assignment

And so I return to my initial assignment to design a space for communal prayer. My architectural practice is a mix of residential and institutional projects. In 2008 I was invited to a restricted competition for the Kesher synagogue in New Jersey, which we won and subsequently worked on for the following year. Among the challenges we needed to address were: (1) the client's wish to wrap the new building around an existing blue Victorian house planted in the center of the site, (2) strict municipal zoning rules and setback laws, (3) the Rabbi's admirable passion for a universally accessible building, and (4) a limited budget. But the most pressing question had to do with the function I was hired to design – the sanctuary space for communal prayer.

In Strong's surprisingly precocious 1909 text, I find the beginning of an answer which ties my exploration of prayer, psychoanalysis and architecture. Strong suggests that prayer is an action of expanding the self in an ever-changing relation to others, a view that is very close to relational psychoanalysis in which through encounters with the other one accepts his multiple self. Profound prayer, I suggest, is experiencing human mortality, deep yearning, painful regret and joyous hope and gratitude, a process that can only be done in an intersubjective field. It was this idea that I would carry into my design and which would guide by formal and structural choices.

The Minyan – Communal Jewish Prayer

I find support for an interpersonal view of prayer in the Hebrew term for a house of prayer, which literally translated means "house of assembly," a meaning preserved in the English word "synagogue," derived

from the Greek term for assembly. But it is not the building that is essential, rather it is the 'Minyan', the quorum of ten adults (traditionally men), without which certain prayers are not said and the Torah is not read aloud. Moreover, almost all the Hebrew prayer texts are written in the plural, expressing a collectivity even when the prayer is recited alone. Through prayer we hear a symphony of voices, yearning, vulnerability, loneliness, fear and death, as well as gratitude, awe, curiosity, memories, hopes and aspirations.

Self and Other

But community can also overshadow the self, the oppressive atmosphere of a political protest. Freud writes after WWI that the group promotes regression to a state of primitive emotions (1921). Prayer space, like analysis, or the delicate relationship of parent and child, or a good employer, must occupy a dialectic position, offering a supportive mutuality while protecting the other's agency (Slavin, J), Winnicott's "capacity to be alone". Derrida In a lecture spoke of prayer as a situation that holds the contradicting feelings of religious belief and philosophical doubt, mature analytic thought and childish fear, a hope that prayer has a real effect and a realization that it might affect us only subjectively. Our prayers are both for our loved ones and to them.

Prayer, whether seen as an immanent experience or a transcendent conversation, aims to allow the participant to access a wide range of authentic emotions that may have been split off or dissociated by the profanity and banality of everyday life and by the traumas, personal, social and historical, we have all suffered. When prayer is understood as an emotional experience, community-a reflective, mentalizing, holding environment of others- becomes a central participant in this situated practice of discovering ourselves through others. The ideal prayer space is therefore one that allows the individual praying to simultaneously feel the sheltering, supporting influence of the fellow congregants in the room and the generations who transmitted and shaped the prayer text, while giving the person opportunities to meditate and contemplate his or her own very personal experience, experiencing at the same time a capacity to be alone.

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