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The rabbis defined prayer as **abodah she-balev** (worship of the heart; see Sifre Dt. 41; Ta’an. 2a). When discussing the prayer book, as we are about to do, we must constantly bear that definition in mind. People may entertain the kindest sentiments towards the undernourished, but unless they give them to eat and drink they have not fulfilled the Torah’s *misvah* of sustaining those in need. The ancient rabbis *darshu ta’ama diqra* - that is to say, they sought out the reason (*or* underlying purpose) of the *misvot*. The *misvah* of providing for the hungry, they understood its purpose to be relief of bodily suffering and promotion of somatic wellbeing and life. In other words, it is a *misvah* that requires implementation of a thoroughly concrete sort; and as such, good intentions - be they the loftiest - are ineffectual. To be sure, if the *misvah* is accompanied with benevolent feelings so much the better. But the rabbis concluded that it was preferable to give even out of mixed motives than not to give at all, because what counts is the physical delivery of assistance (see Pes. 8a bottom et al.). *Tefillah* is the converse. Being a *misvah* of the heart, *tefillah* cannot be substituted by mouthing – august as the words might be. Even when prayer is verbally articulated, the articulation serves as an aid to inner devotion, not a surrogate. This is especially true of private prayer, as R. Bahya b. Peqodah (c. 1080) observes:

Words need thought, but thought, when able to organize itself in the heart, has no need of speech.¹

Moreover, *tefillah* that is lip-service and not from the heart, rates in the Talmud as worse than futile. The person who performs such parrot-praying is committing a sin, whose penalty will be nothing less than forfeiture of Torah (Shab. 138b).

Notwithstanding, and despite its theoretical subservience, verbalization came to assume an increasingly pivotal function in communal *tefillah*. In order to pray in unison, the individuals’ wants and desires must yield to the group’s. Needless to say, individuals continued to ‘pour out their souls’ before Hashem in the privacy of home or hovel or from any depth of degradation at which they found themselves. Communal prayer did not usurp any of that. Still, prayer as a public act of worship, inevitably, pulls the soul in a somewhat different direction from raw **abodah she-balev**. Jewish liturgy is, on one level, the story of that tussle between spontaneity and decorum; between personal spirituality and communal cohesion. On the literary level, it is the history of the prayer book and its vicissitudes...

¹ *Duties of the Heart*, Eighth Treatise, Spiritual Accounting 3:9. Cf. “Rabbenu Shemuel writes even those who hold *misvot* do not require *kavvanah* would apply that rule only to such *misvot* that entail action. However, a *misvah* that involves speech alone, would certainly require *kavvanah* because [worshipful] speech is nothing unless it comes from the heart” (Beth Yosef, O.H. 589 s.v. *ve-sarikh*). See also n.30.