

# A Jew Reads *al-Fātiḥah*

Leonard Gordon

## The Opener

In addition to serving as the opening of the Quran, these seven initial verses known as “*al-Fātiḥah*” (Arabic for “the opener”) play a special role in Muslim devotion, including being recited in every unit of ritual prayer. As a Jewish reader, I heard echoes from the Jewish liturgy and textual tradition; both the similarities and differences enhanced my appreciation of the theologies and sensibilities of Jewish and Muslim traditions.<sup>1</sup>

The title of this *surah*, or segment, signals its position as the first of the Quran. While most of the Quran’s *surahs* are arranged in approximate size order (as are the books of the first text of Rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah) this short *surah* stands out as a prologue. It mirrors the practice in medieval Jewish texts of placing a poetic introduction at the start of works of commentary or law. This text offers the possibility of an opening, a new beginning, a vision of Islam in its fullness.<sup>2</sup>

## In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. (Q. 1:1)

The first verse translates easily into liturgical Hebrew; both Islam and Judaism begin a new venture or text “in the name of God” as an act of piety and humility. Everything that follows is done on behalf of our desire to do God’s will and make God manifest in the world. God is then named as “merciful,” the word for which derives from the same root in both Arabic and Hebrew, a root that means, “womb.” God loves humanity as a mother loves the product of her womb, or with womb-love. Like Jewish thought, Islamic theology depicts God as balancing the traits of mercy and judgement; here God’s mercy is solely and dramatically highlighted. A subsequent verse, however, points to God as ruler over the “Day of Judgement,” often interpreted to mean the day when debts are settled, evoking the imagery of justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Lenny Gordon wrote this reflection on *Jum‘ah* (Friday) and the Eve of Shabbat during a retreat at the Shadhiliyya Sufi Center in Napa County, California during a “Border Crossing” course for Andover Newton Theological School.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the Quranic verses that are quoted in this volume are from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et al., eds, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015). For an excellent, concise commentary on the meanings and significances of *al-Fātiḥah*, see *The Study Quran*, pp. 3-11.

### **Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds. (Q. 1:2)**

The second verse deepens our appreciation for God who is named as Master and Sustainer of the worlds. In Jewish liturgy, we also praise God as creator and sustainer, which is the opening theme of Jewish worship morning and evening in the first blessing before the Shema, the recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4, and the following liturgy. What does the text mean by “worlds”? Reflecting on parallel usages in Jewish worship, the plural “worlds” might refer to this world and the world that is coming, or it may reflect on the multiple worlds that co-exist simultaneously in the present, perhaps harkening to the concept of the four cosmic realms that is shared by Jewish and Islamic mystics. In Islam: the realms of matter, souls, spirits and of God. In Judaism: the realms of action, formation, creation and emanation.

### **The Compassionate, the Merciful. (Q. 1:3)**

Strikingly, this short *surah* repeats the designations for God provided in the first verse. The repetition underscores the centrality of mercy as a divine attribute and it serves as a loving frame for the verse evoking judgement to follow.

### **Master of the Day of Reckoning. (Q. 1:4)**

This phrase also translates easily into liturgical Hebrew. The reference is to a final day of judgment, a time anticipated during Judaism’s High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah (when God is enthroned as King/Master) and Yom Kippur. Having named God as merciful and praised him as our creator and sustainer, we now acknowledge a more challenging reality: there is a day when God will sit as our King in judgment. Similarly, in the liturgy for the High Holidays, Jews repeat God’s traits of mercy known as the “13 divine attributes” and enthrone God as King and Creator before confessing sins. In both traditions, we approach God as judge only from a place of security in God’s mercy and appreciation for God’s gift of life.

In the context of this *surah* we are now at the midpoint, the hinge. We move from God as Creator/Sustainer to God as Judge/Redeemer in the end times. In Jewish worship, the order of prayer is Creator-Revealer-Redeemer, as reflected in the blessings before and after the Shema and in the flow of Shabbat worship from evening to morning to afternoon. God created the world and then gives us law and will, in the end, redeem. In *al-Fātiḥah*, the movement is different. Here we acknowledge God as the ultimate Judge, and then we ask God for the guidance we need to receive a good outcome on the Day of Reckoning.

### **Thee we worship and from Thee we seek help. (Q. 1:5)**

A prayer from the Zohar, the classic text of medieval Jewish mysticism found in the Sabbath morning service, reads as follows, “Not on mortals, nor on angels do I rely, but rather on the God of heaven, the God of truth, whose Torah is truth and whose prophets are true, and who abounds in deeds of goodness and truth.”<sup>3</sup> Replacing the word “Torah” with “Quran,” one can easily see the parallels in content and sensibility: God is the object of our worship and the source of our salvation.

### **Guide us upon the strait path, (Q. 1:6)**

This request echoes the familiar words of the twenty-third Psalm, “God leads me beside still waters.” The world offers many paths, and most are crooked and perilous. We seek guidance to select the straight path and to avoid the voice of Shaytan (Satan) who whispers to us to drive us in other directions. In worship this *surah* is introduced with a line placing our hope in God to protect us from the accursed Shaytan. Judaism names the internal and external forces that tempt humanity the “evil inclination” often understood as the id of modern psychology. We can recall the verse in Genesis 4:7: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Feld, ed. Siddur Lev Shalem (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2016) 170.

**the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray. (Q. 1:7)**

Poetic closure is strengthened by the length of this final verse in contrast to the earlier, staccato verses. Two paths are referenced recalling Deuteronomy 30:15, “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.” While many biblical passages, especially in the prophets, also end exhortations with a note of warning, Jewish liturgy tends to avoid such endings by cutting off the negative or adding a verse that ends on a note of hope. Though the surah ends with a stark warning, we will begin the next surah with the *bismillah*, “In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,” reminding us of God’s unbounded mercy.

The opening of the Qur’an provides me with an opportunity, an opening, to reread my own tradition, its liturgy and theology, with fresh eyes. Each line points to a shared heritage of deeds and thoughts, a heritage that offers hope for a shared future