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Prayer and Human Needs: Rabbi Soloveitchik and Other Recent Thinkers

Yeshayahu Leibowitz: Halakhic observance as a way of life . . . precludes conversion into a means to some ulterior end. Most of the mitzvot are meaningless except as expressions of worship. They have no utility in terms of the satisfaction of human needs The mitzvah of prayer—the obligatory routine prayer of institutionalized religion—can serve as proof. The concept of prayer has two different meanings: first, prayer in the sense of “a prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before God” (Ps. 102:1); second, prayer as defined in the prayerbook The prayerbook, which determines the content of the mitzvah of prayer, does not express the spontaneous outpouring of the soul. It contains a text of fixed prayer, imposed upon one as a duty and not conditioned by his spiritual or material needs or by his feeling. The same eighteen benedictions are recited by the bridegroom before his wedding ceremony, by the widower returning from the funeral of his wife, and the father who has just buried his only son. Recitation of the identical set of psalms is the daily duty of the person enjoying the beauties and bounty of this world and the one whose world has collapsed. The same order of supplications is prescribed for those who feel the need for them and those who do not. (Translation from Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman, p. 16)

Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:51: Know that all the practices of the worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments, have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than with matters pertaining to this world.

Albert Einstein, address at Princeton University (1939/1940): A person who is religiously enlightened appears to me to be one who has, to the best of his ability, liberated himself from the fetters of his selfish desires and is preoccupied with thoughts, feelings, and aspirations to which he clings because of their super-personal value. . . .

Rabbi Joseph B Soloveitchik

1. Prayer (tefillah) is one of the media through which man communicates with the Almighty God. I purposely say "one of the media" in order to refute the doctrine advanced by the mystics. . .that prayer is the only means leading to the successful realization of our blind intent of reaching out to Him. Judaism has not subscribed to the idea of the centrality of prayer, even though it has not underestimated the importance of prayer as regards our God-searching and God-pursuing. (*Worship of the Heart*, ed. Shalom Carmy [Toras HoRav Foundation 2003]; hereafter abbreviated *WH*, 3)

2. Let us note that Judaism has never promised that God accepts all prayer. The efficacy of prayer is not the central term of inquiry in our philosophy of *avodah she-ba-lev*. Acceptance of prayer is a hope, a vision, a wish, a petition, but not a principle or premise. The foundation of prayer is not the conviction of its effectiveness but the belief that through it we approach God intimately. . .The basic function of prayer is not its practical consequences but the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of God and man. (*WH*, 35)

3. The act (ma`aseh of prayer is formal; but the fulfillment of prayer, its *kiyyum*, is subjective: it is the service of the heart..The intention required for prayer is not like the *kavvanah* required for other *mitzvot* . In other commandments the intention is not the most important element. . .[I]t is the act, the concrete action, that is primary, and *kavvanah* simply accompanies the action. With prayer.. *kavvanah* is the essence and substance: prayer without intention is nothing. (*WH*, 147).

4. Man is surely aware of many needs, but the needs he is aware of are not always his ownQuite often man loses himself by identifying himself with the wrong image. Because of this misidentification, man adopts the wrong table of needs which he feels he must gratify . . .Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should or should not petition God about.. . . In a word, man finds his need-awareness, himself, in prayer. . .[H] becomes a redeemed being ("Redemption, Prayer, and Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 1978, 62)

5. Judaism, in contradistinction to mystical quietism . . . wants man to cry out aloud against any kind of pain, to react indignantly to all kinds of injustice or unfairness. For Judaism held that the individual who displays indifference to pain and suffering, who meekly reconciles himself to the ugly, disproportionate and unjust in life, is not capable of appreciating beauty and goodness. Whoever permits his legitimate needs to go unsatisfied will never be sympathetic to the crying needs of others. A human morality based on love and friendship, on sharing in the travail of others, cannot be practiced if the person's own need-awareness is dull, and he does not know what suffering is. Hence Judaism rejected models of existence which deny human need, such as the angelic or the monastic.

6. When *tefillah* and Talmud Torah unite in one redemptive experience, prayer becomes *avodah she-ba-lev*. What does this term denote? Not the service by the heart, but the *offering* of the heart; Judaic dialectic plays “mischievously” with two opposites, two irreconcilable aspects of prayer. It announces prayer as self-acquisition, self-discovery, self-objectification and self-redemption. . . . Yet there is another aspect to prayer : prayer is the act of giving away. Prayer means sacrifice, unrestricted offering of the whole self, the returning to God of body and soul, everything one possesses and cherishes Initially, prayer helps man discover himself, through understanding and affirmation of his need-awareness. Once the task of self-discovery is fulfilled, man is summoned to ascend the altar and return everything he has just acquired to God. (“Redemption, Prayer, and Talmud Torah,” *Tradition*, spring 1978, 70-72)

7. The praying individual annuls himself in order to acquire himself. From his prayer man emerges firm, elevated and sublime, having found his redemption in self-loss and self-recovery. . . . [A]fter man comes crashing down from the heights from the heights of yearning and aspiration to the depths of confusion and terror, after self-negation and self-recovery, after the sacrifice, the binding and the offering on the altar, and after the return to existence—comes again the delightful, joyous and confident experience: God appears as a safe haven and secure abode. (“Reflections on the Amidah,” *Worship of the Heart* [WH], 179, 181)

8. Man is always in need because he is always in crisis and distress Man is dissatisfied with himself and he lacks faith in the justifiability and legitimacy of His existence. (WH, 35)

9. [Quotations 9-13 are from *The Lonely Man of Faith*.] Prayer likewise [=like prophecy] is unimaginable without having man stand before and address himself to God in a manner reminiscent of the prophet’s dialogue with God [Prayer] transcends the bounds of liturgical worship and must not be reduced to its external-technical aspects such as praise, thanksgiving, or even petition. Prayer is basically an awareness of man finding himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, and to pray has one connotation only: to stand before God

The very essence of prayer is the covenantal experience of being together with and talking to God, and that the concrete performance such as the recitation of texts represents the technique of implementation of prayer and not prayer itself.

In short, prayer and prophecy are two synonymous designations of the covenantal God-man colloquy Prayer is the continuation of prophecy While within the prophetic community God takes the initiative—He speaks and man listens—in the prayer community the initiative belongs to man.

10. The foundation of efficacious and noble prayer is human solidarity and sympathy or the covenantal awareness of existential togetherness, of sharing and experiencing the travail of those for whom majestic Adam the first has no concern.

11. Who is qualified to engage in the prayer colloquy? Clearly, the person who is ready to cleanse himself of imperfection and evil. Any kind of injustice, corruption, cruelty or the like desecrates the very essence of the prayer adventure . . .

12. Prayer likewise consists not only of an awareness of the presence of God, but an act of committing oneself to God and accepting His ethico-moral authority.

13. The awareness which comes with prayer is rooted in man's experiencing his "creatureliness" . . . and the absurdity embedded in his own existence Man, as a slave of God, is completely dependent upon Him. Man enjoys no freedom.

14. Therefore, when I speak about the philosophy of prayer or *Shema*, I do not claim universal validity for my conclusions. I am not lecturing on philosophy of prayer as such, but on prayer as understood, experienced and enjoyed by an individual. I acquaint you with my own personal experience. Whether. . .my experience can be detached from my idiosyncrasies and transferred to others, I do not know. (*WH*, 2)

Rabbi David Hartman

When you discuss your needs in a love relationship, you do not necessarily expect your beloved to solve your problems. Reassurance and comfort may be gained simply through knowing that your beloved listens to you in your anguish and that you are not alone in your plight. I understand petitional prayer as expressing the need of covenantal lovers of God to share their total human situation with God. (*A Living Covenant*, 164)

Petitional prayer reflects how the worshiper feels unembarrassed to bare his or her total situation and needs before the reality of a personal God. No human need is petty or trivial before the covenantal God, who commands a total way of life. (*A Living Covenant*, 164)

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits

"'A Psalm of David in his kingship' is a phrase we do not find, but we do find, 'a Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness'" (*Midrash Tehillim* 63:1) Turning to God spontaneously in time of trouble may cast a reflection on the value of such prayer, if it represents a small island of God-seeking in the midst of an ocean of God-forgetting

There is no time in human life which is not an occasion for prayerThe Jew prays regularly because one ought to pray all the time but cannot do so Once we, through obligatory prayer, give expression to man's unceasing need to pray, the individual may lose himself freely in the spontaneity of occasion-conditioned praying, without suggesting that what one seeks and affirms occasionally has only occasional validity. (*Prayer* [1962], 36-40).

At best, the plea of the philosopher or the mystic will be prayer; but no more prayer than the cry that reaches God in the dead of night out of the dungeons of a soul along skid row. In fact, the philosopher who would pray to God only for the nobler things of life may easily be a pedantic bore, imagining that God might be impressed with his ethics but not with the hunger pangs of his poor ulcerated bowels. (*Prayer*, 25)

Shalom Rosenberg, in *Jewish Prayer*, ed. Gabriel Cohn: He ["modern man"] was brought up in a scientific worldview which presumes to offer a full and comprehensive explanation of all phenomena and yet in spite of this he is bidden to stand in prayer. It is the paradox of the man who, in spite of knowing the laws of meteorology, stands and prays to God to "cause the wind to blow and the rain to come down."

Howard K. Wettstein: I wasn't speaking about what God is, nor do I know what He is. (Remember His enigmatic remark in Exodus 3:14, "I am what I am.") I was addressing my experience, with its strange duality: In prayer, we express our deepest selves to God who understands. I pray, and I mean it. But I am "blessed" with an additional sense that in so supposing I'm over my head; I don't know what I'm talking about. Both feelings are real and powerful. (New York Times Opinionator blog, March 30, 2014)