YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #57: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (3)**

This is our third and final *shiur* on prayer in the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. So far, we have seen that Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought is unique in that it grows out of the world of Halakha, while others’ teachings grew primarily from the worlds of the Bible, Aggada, and Jewish thought. Rabbi Soloveitchik teaches us that the world of Halakha can also serve as a broad source of profound Jewish thought.

In this *shiur*,we will discuss a different – almost opposite – source of Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought. Over the course of his life, Rabbi Soloveitchik was deeply exposed to Western culture, thought, and philosophy, and he makes use of all this in his own teachings. The main philosophical current expressed in his writings is that of existentialism, a perspective that sets concern with existence itself before the questions of essence that had been the central preoccupation of philosophy for generations. This thought underlies his essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith," in which prayer as well is discussed from an existential angle. Rabbi Soloveitchik makes it clear from the beginning that his intention in this essay is not to deal with abstract essential questions, but with the existential experience of man. He also points out that he is not describing the existential experience of man as a whole, but the subjective experience that he goes through personally. This experience is described as a movement between devotion and despair, between closeness to God and a feeling of abandonment and distance from Him. Rabbi Soloveitchik adds that his essay does not offer a solution, nor can such a solution be found; all it does is give expression to personal experience, which brings a certain relief. With this, he explicitly associates his essay with existential thought.

Over the course of the essay, Rabbi Soloveitchik describes the “man of faith” and his experience of himself as a foreigner in modern Western society. The subject of prayer is part of his complex dialogue with this society. We will consider his description in general terms, as well as the significant place that prayer occupies in this work.

**The Loneliness of the Man of Faith**

In "The Lonely Man of Faith," Rabbi Soloveitchik reflects on his life as a Torah-observant, believing Jew in the modern Western world. We see his application of Western thought not only in the book’s existential perspectives, but also in the way he presents his ideas – describing perceptions and experiences through typologies in order to draw contrasts between them. As if with the hand of an artist, he portrays two different characters, two personality patterns; each undergoes a detailed typological analysis and is described precisely and distinctly. He draws the inspiration for these characters, whom he refers to as "the man of majesty" and "the man of faith," from the first two chapters of the book of *Bereishit.* The man described in chapter 1 is the man of majesty, who was created in God's image and was given the task of ruling over creation, conquering and developing it. In contrast, the man described in chapter 2 is the man of faith, who was created from the dust and stands not before the world but before God. Though it may be difficult to find real people who absolutely and exclusively belong to one of these two typologies, the polar presentation of the two of them sharpens the meaning of the difference between them. Here we encounter another dimension in Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought: in both content and form, his thought is dialectical, moving between deep poles without giving them an idyllic harmonious solution. The presentation of these two opposing characters is part of Rabbi Soloveitchik's dialectical method. Apart from that, the man of faith himself (who is one of the two characters described) is in a dialectical tension within himself, as we will see below.

The man of majesty is characterized by his creative power, and his main talent is practical intelligence. His intelligence enables him to perfect the world, creating advanced works to develop it. He takes the world out of its raw nature step by step: he develops industry, transportation, and technology; he introduces new inventions, links distant places, and even manages to breach the earth's boundaries and lift off into outer space. The man of majesty looks at the world from the perspective of the question "How?": How do things work, and how can they be developed further? He is not looking for essence and meaning; his perspective is utilitarian. This is how he realizes his standing as a human being. Ancient man may have seen himself as small and weak in relationship to the forces of nature, but modern man has succeeded in conquering nature, overcoming difficulties, defeating diseases and more.

There is no doubt that the term "image of God" in the first account refers to man's inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Man's likeness to God expresses itself in man's striving and ability to become a creator. Adam the first who was fashioned in the image of God was blessed with great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal, the most outstanding of which is the intelligence, the human mind, capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings. In spite of the boundless divine generosity providing man with many intellectual capacities and interpretive perspectives in his approach to reality, God, in imparting the blessing to Adam the first and giving him the mandate to subdue nature, directed Adam's attention to the functional and practical aspects of his intellect through which man is able to gain control of nature….

Adam the first is interested in just a single aspect of reality and asks one question only – "How does the cosmos function?" He is not fascinated by the question, "Why does the cosmos function at all?" nor is he interested in the question, "What is its essence?" He is only curious to know how it works… Adam the first is overwhelmed by one quest, namely, to harness and dominate the elemental natural forces and to put them at his disposal. ("The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, vol. 7, no. 1, Winter 1964-5, pp. 11-12)

In contrast to the man of majesty, the man of faith looks out on the world and asks "Why?" Facing existence and the mystery in it leads him to search for meaning, to seek God who stands behind the world, who is near and distant at the same time, who causes both love and fear, strength as well as helplessness – a polarized, dialectical life. He does not try to conquer and rule, but rather to cling to God and be conquered by Him. When man conquers the world, he merits honor; when he is conquered by God, he merits redemption.

Adam the second keeps on wondering: Who is He who trails me steadily, uninvited and unwanted, like an everlasting shadow, and vanishes into the recesses of transcendence the very instant I turn around to confront this numinous, awesome and mysterious "He"? Who is He who fills Adam with awe and bliss, humility and a sense of greatness, concurrently? Who is He to whom Adam clings in passionate, all-consuming love and from whom he flees in mortal fear and dread?… In a word, Adam the second explores not the scientific abstract universe but the irresistibly fascinating qualitative world where he establishes an intimate relationship with God. The Biblical metaphor referring to God breathing life into Adam alludes to the actual preoccupation of the latter with God, to his genuine living experience of God rather than to some divine potential or endowment in Adam symbolized by *imago Dei*. Adam the second lives in close union with God. His existential "I" experience is interwoven in the awareness of communing with the Great Self whose footprints he discovers along the many tortuous paths of creation. (Ibid., pp. 17-18)

Neither of these two people remains alone; they also take part in the community. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s portrayal is inspired by the two accounts of the creation of the man and the woman in relation to each other – one of the most striking differences, in his view, between Adam of chapter 1 and Adam of chapter 2. Adam of chapter 1 was created together with the woman, while Adam of chapter 2 begins his journey alone, and only afterwards the woman is created as his helpmate. The community of Adam 1, the man of majesty, is the natural community, based on a functional and utilitarian partnership. Adam and Chava were created together, and the joining of their individual powers brings mankind to higher achievements. In contrast, Adam 2, the man of faith, needs a helpmate, owing to the existential loneliness in which he finds himself. He can find the balm for loneliness only in a community of faith, with another person who is also a lonely believer. A covenantal community is founded between them.

The fact that existential loneliness is relieved specifically by the community of *faith* reveals a far-reaching assertion of Rabbi Soloveitchik: Rabbi Soloveitchik takes the existential concept in an existential-religious direction, and claims that the alleviation of loneliness, which is achieved by a covenantal bond, can only be done together with God. Man cannot relieve his loneliness and find the woman on his own; God presented the woman to the man, and He alone can rescue the man from the state of loneliness. The connection with Him – a three-way connection between the person, the other, and God – is what redeems the believing person.

With this concise outline of the two types that Rabbi Soloveitchik sets against each other, we can see that prayer belongs to the world of the second Adam, the man of faith.

**The Prayer of the Man of Faith**

Rabbi Soloveitchik points out the deep connection between two central concepts: prophecy and prayer. Prayer is standing before God, as is prophecy. These are two directions of dialogue between God and man – in prophecy, God initiates the dialogue, whereas in prayer, the initiator is man. According to *Chazal*’s discussion of three daily prayers being instituted in correspondence to the patriarchs or to the daily offerings, prayer began as soon as prophecy appeared in the world – and when prophecy departed and the dialogue between God and man was in danger of being cancelled, the members of the Great Assembly made sure it would continue by way of the prayer channel. They enacted prayers that enable turning to God even when He does not initiate a turn to us.

Prayer likewise is unimaginable without having man stand before and address himself to God in a manner reminiscent of the prophet's dialogue with God… In short, prayer and prophecy are two synonymous designations of the covenantal God-man colloquy. Indeed, the prayer community was born the very instant the prophetic community expired, and when it did come into the spiritual world of the Jew of old, it did not supersede the prophetic community but rather perpetuated it. Prayer is the continuation of prophecy and the fellowship of prayerful men is ipso facto the fellowship of prophets. The difference between prayer and prophecy is, as I have already mentioned, related not to the substance of the dialogue but rather to the order in which it is conducted. While within the prophetic community God takes the initiative – He speaks and man listens – in the prayer community the initiative belongs to man: he does the speaking and God, the listening… For the men of the Great Assembly knew that with the withdrawal of the colloquy from the field of consciousness of the Judaic community, the latter would lose the intimate companionship of God and consequently its covenantal status. In prayer they found the salvation of that colloquy, which, they insisted, must go on forever. If God had stopped calling man, they urge, let man call God. (Ibid. pp. 34-37)

Prayer at its essence belongs to the community of the covenant – not to an individual person, and not even to two, namely, God and man. Prayer connects three elements: God, man, and the community or nation around him. Prayer is formulated in the plural and must be held in public, and the object of prayer is not only the individual but also those around him. *Chazal* determined that one who prays for another person is answered first. In this, as well, prayer is similar to prophecy: just as the essence of prophecy in Israel is not a mystical experience which the prophet merits, but rather a meeting of the prophet with God for the purpose of being sent by God to the people of Israel, the worshiper is also required to go beyond his own private boundaries.

The prayerful community must not, likewise, remain a two-fold affair: a transient "I" addressing himself to the eternal "He." The inclusion of others is indispensable. Man should avoid praying for himself alone. The plural form of prayer is of central Halakhic significance. When disaster strikes, one must not be immersed completely in his own personal destiny, thinking exclusively of himself. Being concerned only with himself, and petitioning God merely for himself… The fenced-in egocentric and ego-oriented Adam the first is ineligible to join the covenantal prayer community of which God is a fellow member. (Ibid. pp. 37-38)

**Prayer and Obligation**

Another aspect of prayer emerges from the comparison between prayer and prophecy, and from Rabbi Soloveitchik’s definition of both as a covenant: a covenant is related to obligation. Prophecy that is intended to reach the people imposes an obligation on them, and prayer is also related to obligation. Both are connected to normative action, and are not lofty experiences that are intended only for the elite. Rabbi Soloveitchik presents this idea first with respect to prophecy:

If we were to eliminate the norm from the prophetic God-man encounter, confining the latter to its apocalyptic aspects, then the whole prophetic drama would be acted out by a limited number of privileged individuals to the exclusion of the rest of the people. Such a prospect, turning the prophetic colloquy into an esoteric-egotistic affair, would be immoral from the viewpoint of Halakhic Judaism which is exoterically-minded and democratic to its very core. (Ibid. p. 40)

Related to this is the fact that the covenantal community is founded on Halakha, and this binds every Jew in equal measure. It is true that only Moshe ascended to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, but from the moment it was translated into terms such as "You shall not murder," "You shall not commit adultery," and "Honor your father and your mother" – it became the property of the entire community. The same is true regarding prayer: it cannot be seen as a mystical experience of high-ranking individuals; it belongs to the entire community.

Later, Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that prayer also involves a covenant and obligation. Just as prophecy carries with it binding requirements of the people, prayer also includes the acceptance of a moral burden. "Who may ascend the Lord's mountain? Who may stand in His holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts…" (*Tehillim* 24:3-4) – God may be approached only by one who cleanses himself and purifies his heart. This is also how Rabbi Soloveitchik explains the obligation to juxtapose redemption to prayer: One must first obligate himself to accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven and the yoke of the commandments through the recital of *Shema*, and only then can he pray.

Who is qualified to engage God in the prayer colloquy? Clearly, the person who is ready to cleanse himself of imperfection and evil. Any kind of injustice, corruption, cruelty, etc., desecrates the very essence of the prayer adventure, since it encases man in an ugly little world into which God is unwilling to enter. If man craves to meet God in prayer, then he must purge himself of all that separates him from God. The Halakhah has never looked upon prayer as a separate magical sphere in which man may engage without integrating it into the total pattern of his life. God hearkens to prayer if it rises from a heart contrite over a muddled and faulty life and from a resolute mind ready to redeem this life. In short, only the committed person is qualified to pray and to meet God. Prayer is always the harbinger of moral reformation. (Ibid. pp. 41-42)

This principle, of purity of heart and of obligation as the basis of prayer, appears often in the words of *Chazal* and later Jewish thinkers. Rabbi Soloveitchik connects it to the making of a three-way covenant, between man and others and God.

**The Man of Majesty Misses Out on Prayer**

Among the different parts of prayer, we saw in the previous *shiurim* that Rabbi Soloveitchik places petition deep in the center. This is the focus of the man of faith's prayer, and it is what most clearly expresses his existential condition. It is true that the man of majesty can also find himself praying – he may marvel with cosmic admiration at the world he is entrusted with developing, and even respond to this with praise and thanksgiving to the Creator, but this is not the essence of prayer. The depth of the experience of prayer is standing before God in a dialogue, out of submission, a sense of nullification, going back and forth between distance from Him and the desire for closeness. These elements are expressed in the dimension of petition in prayer, and therefore it is suitable specifically for the man of faith.

The great challenge of a believing person living in the modern world, in which the surrounding culture brings him face to face with man's power and his ability to control, is to move towards Adam of chapter 2, who also knows his weaknesses, who knows loneliness and division, and from this he enters into the covenant and accepts the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. The man of majesty does not undergo this experience; he is busy with the accelerated development of the world. Prayer is part of the deep experience that the man of faith merits, and that the man of majesty misses out on.

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With this we conclude our examination of prayer in the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik. We have highlighted several unique features in his approach: 1) the development of his thinking specifically from halakhic discussions, and 2) the development of his thinking with the controlled use of modern philosophy in general, and existential thought in particular. These two characteristics are even intertwined; halakhic thought is included in the principles underlying the analysis in "The Lonely Man of Faith," which presents the existential dimension.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's discussion of prayer takes place against the background of the fact that modern Jews take part in the cultural world that surrounds them. In this, Rabbi Soloveitchik deviates from most of the thinkers we discussed previously, who were mainly concerned with the internal Jewish discussion of prayer. As a result, the preoccupation with the fundamental concepts introduced by the Ari, the clarification of the sparks and the raising of the worlds, which we found in many earlier thinkers, is missing from the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik – who was less connected to the world of Kabbala, although he did not completely exclude himself from it.

(Translated by David Strauss)