

OUR READERS RESPOND

Worship of the Heart

TO THE EDITOR:

R. Joshua Amaru's lengthy review essay of *Worship of the Heart* ("Prayer and the Beauty of God: Rav Soloveitchik on Prayer and Aesthetics," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 13 [2005]: 148-176) is a very thorough and thoughtful examination and critique of several of the book's major themes. I would like to make two minor critical observations and one supporting observation regarding the article.

To begin with the critical observations: First, Amaru, in describing the book, states, "The first half is an attempt to outline a general philosophy of prayer, while the second half is largely made up of philosophical/theological interpretations of specific prayers, *shema* and its blessings . . ." (148-49). And again, in the essay's conclusion, Amaru states that "the second half of the book . . . is focused on interpretations of specific prayers" (172). This description of the distinction between the two parts of the book as one of "kelal u-perat" is misleading. For the Rav sharply differentiates between prayer, which is service of the heart, and the *Shema*, which is the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus the Rav argues that one must distinguish between the inward intention to accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and the inward intention required for prayer.

Avodah she-ba-lev (service of the heart) [in *tefillah*] asserts itself in the great experience of Divine presence, the awareness of God, of His proximity and closeness to us. In service of the heart, the finite being encounters his infinite, invisible God, stands before Him and addresses himself to Him. . . . *Tefillah* is considered a dialogue, a conversation, a colloquy between God and man, between Infinity and finitude, Being and nothingness. Man does not talk about God in the third person, as someone who is not there. He employs the thou, the grammatical form which brings together two unique individualities. . . . In short, in prayer man establishes contact with God. . . .

Reading *Shema* does not entail the state of consciousness required for prayer. "Accepting the yoke of Heaven" is not tantamount to enter-

ing the Divine presence. . . . For the performance of *Shema* is not the movement of going and coming to God. No encounter takes place. The element of dialogue is lacking in this ritual. It expresses itself more in the form of declaration, confession, profession of faith. . . . Of course, God is also experienced when one reads *Shema*, but not in a sense of fellowship or communion via the grammatical thou. God, in the experience of reading *Shema*, is “He,” the third person, the remote transcendent Being Whose yoke we do accept, Whose will we must abide, . . . Whose authority we acknowledge, yet into Whose presence we must not venture. . . . (pp. 95-97)

I have just cited here some key excerpts from an extended and penetrating analysis on the part of the Rav of the two different types of *kavvanah*, the two different modes of consciousness, the two different moods present in the reciting of *Shema* and prayer. It should be evident from the above, by the way, that in the strict sense, the term “*avodah sheba-lev*,” “service of the heart,” applies only to prayer and not to *Shema*.

Second, Amaru speaks of Kantian influences in *Worship of the Heart*. To be more precise, he ought to have spoken of neo-Kantian influences, particularly the influence of Hermann Cohen. This would have enabled Amaru to resolve some loose ends. Thus, Amaru states that “The Rav elaborates a kind of structural psychology in which human experience can be divided into three parts: the intellectual/cognitive gesture, the ethical gesture, and the aesthetic gesture. This division, while not explicit in Kant, is clearly Kantian in origin” (p.164). But while not explicit in Kant, this three-fold division is explicit in Cohen’s philosophy. Witness the titles of Cohen’s three systematic works, corresponding to Kant’s three Critiques: *Logic of Pure Cognition*, *Ethics of Pure Will*, *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*. In general, Amaru’s discussion of these three gestures in the Rav’s thought would have benefitted from some comparison with Cohen. Further, Amaru correctly notes that “In an extended interpretation of Maimonides’ account of the sin of Adam, the Rav argues that Adam’s sin was precisely the preference for the aesthetic . . . over the ethical-cognitive. . . .” (p.167). And in the note appended to this text (note 27, p.175) Amaru observes that “This is a somewhat unusual reading of the *Guide* 1:2 in that it claims that ethics is part of the consciousness of Adam before the fall.” But, as has often been noted, “this somewhat unusual reading of the *Guide* 1:2,” which, incidentally, the Rav puts forward also in “Confrontation” and *The Lonely Man of Faith*, is taken straight from Cohen. Indeed, Professor Aviezer Ravitzky relates that he once asked the

Rav in personal conversation why he favored this interpretation of Maimonides' text, and the Rav's first response was "This is the way Hermann Cohen explains it." See "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6:2 (1964): 10; *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday, 2006), 18, note*; and Ravitzky, "Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik on Human Knowledge: Between Maimonidean and Neo-Kantian Philosophy" *Modern Judaism* 6, 2 (1986): 174.

These slight critical observations, I hasten to add, are not intended in any way to detract from the importance of Amaru's review.

I now proceed to the supporting observation. Amaru in his essay writes:

I was recently asked by a total stranger to pray for the health of a particular sick person whom I did not know and had never even heard of. I will never know, and, to be honest, I am not really interested to know if the object of my prayer recovered from his illness. I have always felt uncomfortable in such situations; it's not difficult to say the words, but the very attempt to "collect prayers" seems to be some kind of "divine nagging" (pp.161-162).

How might the Rav have responded to Amaru's discomfort?

In my recent two-part article, "On Translating *Ish ha-Halakhah* with the Rav: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's Supplementary Notes to *Halakhic Man [HM]*" (*YU Commentator*, Oct. 23, Nov. 6, 2006), I presented many of the supplementary observations that the Rav both orally and on occasion even in writing added to the text of *HM* when he reviewed the draft of my English translation of *Ish ha-Halakhah* in summer, 1981. In the article I noted that one of the characteristics of halakhic man that the Rav emphasizes in *HM* is the exoteric nature of his religious viewpoint, as expressed particularly in halakhic man's approach to prayer. In this connection, in *HM*, p. 43, the Rav writes:

No person, according to the Halakhah, needs the aid of others in order to approach God. A person needs no advocates or special pleaders. . . . And just as the Halakhah rejects the notion of human intercessors, so, too, it rejects the notion of transcendental intercessors such as angels or seraphim.

I further noted that the Rav's blanket assertion that "a person needs no advocates or special pleaders" raises the obvious objection that in fact we do ask people to pray on our behalf. In response to this objection, as I pointed out, the Rav added the following extended supplementary comment. This comment, I should add, is the lengthiest of the Rav's expansions, and he carefully wrote it out in longhand.

Of course Jewish prayer is community prayer. I pray for the many; the many pray for me. We find many instances in the Bible when one individual prays for another. Moses, for instance, prayed for Aaron. However, the prayer of the community is rooted in the gesture of praying together, not in that of praying for each other. People who share distress together share also in the act of praying. Moses prayed for Aaron because he experienced the suffering and travail of Aaron. He suffered no less than Aaron the pangs of frustration. Prayer is motivated by need. To pray for each other means to live through a common passional experience which urges, which impels man to pray together.

Therefore it is permissible, moreover commendable, to ask someone to pray for me, since something very important will be manifested by praying together, viz., the unity of existential destiny, the oneness of the sufferer and fellow sufferer, even though the latter physically feels no pain.

What has been forbidden is to plead with transcendental beings such as angels and seraphim to pray on one's behalf. The angels are not exposed to suffering; they feel no need which is sufficient to stimulate prayer. They cannot join the sufferer, cannot experience his tragic destiny. They, should they happen to intercede on one's behalf, would find themselves praying for, not with the individual.

In light of this clearly and forcefully expressed view of the Rav, I believe that he would have sympathized with Amaru's discomfort, since, as Amaru says, in the situation in which he found himself, had he prayed for the health of the individual in question, it would clearly have been a case of "praying for" as opposed to "praying with." Perhaps one can say that the great *zaddik* should not so much be seen as an intermediary between man and God, but as someone, who in the largeness of his soul, is able to empathize with the suffering of any Jew, no matter how distant from him, no matter how unknown to him, and consequently whose prayer on behalf of that suffering individual is always a "praying with" and not a "praying for." Be this as it may, I wish to thank Amaru for his honest and thoughtful discussion of this sensitive and difficult issue.

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