

Theologians of Liturgy

Prayer, as the communication between man and G-d, is a central part of any religion. However, prayer is not a simple thing. It is a combination of words and thought, of formality and intention. Because of this complexity, many theologians have grappled with the issue of prayer. What is prayer? How does one pray effectively? These are the questions which theologians attempt to answer. Among these theologians are Eliezer Berkovits, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, all of whom have written essays on prayer. Although their books—Berkovits’s *Prayer*, Heschel’s *Man’s Quest for G-d*, and Soloveitchik’s *Worship of the Heart*—focus on the purpose and the logistics of prayer, one cannot speak of prayer without speaking of the liturgy which forms the basis of prayer. Thus, in a way, all of these scholars are theologians of the liturgy. The extent to which each is effective in this aspect is to be evaluated in this paper.

In his analysis, Eliezer Berkovits splits prayers into two different types: spontaneous and obligatory. According to him, “in its original form, prayer is not asking G-d for anything; it is not a request. It is a cry; an elementary outburst of woe, a spontaneous call in need; a hurt, a sorrow, given voice.”¹ This prayer, however necessary and heartfelt it may be, does not do justice to G-d’s relationship with man. Berkovits calls this kind of prayer “crisis prayer,” whereas “G-d... is not just a crisis G-d.”² On the other hand, “obligatory prayer... gives acknowledgement to the threefold truth—that there is an ever-present occasion for praising G-d; that man’s needfulness and dependence on G-d are perennially inherent in his situation; that he is ceaselessly bound in gratitude to the

¹ Eliezer Berkovits, *Prayer*, Studies in Torah Judaism (New York: KTAV, 1969), 107.

² *Ibid.*, 116.

Creator.”³ Thus, spontaneous and obligatory prayer are both necessary parts of man’s connection to G-d.

Berkovits also emphasizes the important of kavannah in prayer. “Without Kavanah... prayer is mere verbiage.... Through Kavanah, the relationship between G-d and man—as conceived by prescribed prayer—becomes a reality.”⁴ This relationship is the purpose of prayer. According to Berkovits, “To pray means to make G-d a confidant of one’s sorry and need.”⁵ Because it is the relationship which matters, Jews should not expect to receive results in the way of miracles, but rather “that G-d’s blessing may descend upon [him].”⁶

Although Berkovits does not specifically mention the liturgy in his analysis of prayer, several of his points allude to prayers in the liturgy. One such allusion is in Berkovits’s statement that “it is man’s responsibility to set this truth [of G-d’s eternal presence] always before him; to live all the days of his life and to perform everyone of his deeds with the awareness that it all takes place in the presence of G-d.”⁷ This relates to Reuven Kimelman’s opinion that the order of the paragraphs of the Shema “makes the point that the love of G-d is inextricably bound up with complying with all His commandments.”⁸ Man’s love of G-d is tied together with being aware of G-d’s presence, so Kimelman and Berkovits are essentially making the same point.

³ Ibid., 119.

⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁶ Ibid. 170.

⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁸ Reuven Kimelman, “The Shema Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation” (unpublished manuscript), 15.

Berkovits also points out that “the pattern of obligatory prayer is *Shebah, Bakasha, Hodaah*, Praise, Supplication, Thanksgiving.”⁹ According to Maimonides, this is the pattern in which the Amidah is divided: “The first three blessings consist of praises to G-d, the last three of thanksgiving to Him, whereas the middle blessings are petitions.”¹⁰ Since this opinion has been popular among Jewish scholars for many generations,¹¹ the allusion is clear.

Furthermore, although he does not specify any specific prayer, Berkovits comments on the structure of the prayer service when he writes that “we are familiar with daily occurrences that may serve us as an example—or perhaps only a hint—to render the entrance of G-d’s blessing into the universal order, as it affects us, plausible.” This is the pattern of much of the prayer service. In the Amidah, blessings 4 – 9 present tangible examples of G-d’s ability to redeem His people.¹² In addition, the first blessing before the Shema uses sunrises and sunsets to show G-d’s ability to create.¹³ This is also done throughout the morning blessings: when man experiences daily occurrences such as opening his eyes, he blesses G-d a greater deed such as giving sight to the blind.¹⁴

However, Berkovits recognizes that daily occurrences are not always enough to prove G-d’s abilities to man. Thus, “[w]hat is denied to the individual experience is affirmed by the historic manifestations of the Divine Presence that called Israel into being and has sustained it through the ages.”¹⁵ This connection is made in several places in the liturgy, including Shirat Hayam. According to Kimelman, “The awareness that G-d not

⁹ Berkovits, 122.

¹⁰ Reuven Kimelman, “The Amidah: Its Literary Structure and the Rhetoric of Redemption” (unpublished manuscript), 3-4.

¹¹ Kimelman, “The Amdah,” 3.

¹² Kimelman, “The Amidah,” 0.

¹³ Kimelman, “The Shema Liturgy,” 18.

¹⁴ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Artscroll Siddur*, (New York: Mesorah, 2007), 19.

¹⁵ Berkovits, 98.

only saved them at the Sea but also lovingly led them to Sinai, where G-d's sovereignty was acknowledged, induces the worshipers to chime in triumphantly – “Adonai will continue to be king forever.”¹⁶ The “them” in this sentence is unclear; it could refer to either the ancient Israelites or the current worshippers. This is because the intention of Shirat Hayam's presence in the service is to show G-d's connection to Israel through accounts in which His participation is more evident.

While Berkovits successfully manages to analyze prayer in general, he cannot quite be called a theologian of the liturgy based on this essay. Although he alludes to the liturgy several times, he does not outright analyze it. In fact, with the exception of one instance, he fails to mention the liturgy at all. He uses psalms as evidence of his points,¹⁷ but these psalms are not ones which are part of the daily liturgy, at least in the context of this class. Because of this fact, Berkovits is the weakest theologian of the liturgy among the three included in this paper.

Abraham Joshua Heschel views prayer in much the same way that Berkovits does. According to Heschel, “Prayer is an invitation to G-d to intervene in our lives, to let His will prevail in our affairs; it is the opening of a window to Him in our will, an effort to make Him the Lord of our soul.”¹⁸ As such, kavannah is the key to prayer; “Not the words we utter, the service of the lips, but the way in which the devotion of the heart corresponds to what the words contain, the consciousness of speaking under His eyes, is the pith of prayer.”¹⁹ Heschel also agrees with Berkovits on the meaning of prayer. According to Heschel, ““The purpose of prayer is to be brought to His attention, to be

¹⁶ Reuven Kimelman, “Pesuqei De-Zimrah: A Liturgy in the Making,” (unpublished manuscript), 36.

¹⁷ Berkovits, 99-100, 110, 111, 112, 117.

¹⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for G-d* (Santa Fe: Aurora, 1998), 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

listened to, to be understood by Him; not to know him, but to *be known* to him.”²⁰ This coincides with Berkovits’s opinion that prayer “makes G-d a confidant.”²¹ Heschel, however, differs from Berkovits in his method of analysis. While Berkovits only alluded to the liturgy, Heschel often uses it as evidence for several of his points.

Heschel, like Berkovits, recognizes the difference between personal and obligatory prayer. According to Heschel, the obligatory service was created because “it is difficult for the soul to recall all the thoughts that one ought to have in an act of worship.”²² However, personal prayer is also important. In order to explain this, he says that “tradition requires us to add a silent private prayer each time we recite the fixed liturgy. Thus, over and above the pattern of the liturgy, we ought to bring to expression, or at least to our consciousness, what concerns us most at the moment.” The “silent private prayer” of which Heschel speaks is the Amidah. In this sentence, he explains one view of the function of the Amidah in the service.

Heschel also emphasizes the importance of personal prayer when he says that “[t]o pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments.”²³ Although he does not specifically say so, this sentence points to the blessings of pleasure which men say upon experiencing a wonder such as seeing a rainbow or smelling a sweet fragrance. Since these blessings cannot be said without a physical stimulus,²⁴ the wonder is the heart of the prayer.

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Berkovits, 107.

²² Heschel, 32.

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Reuven Kimelman, “The Rabbinic Theology of The Physical: Blessings, Body and Soul, Resurrection, Covenant and Election,” in *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven Katz, vol. 4 of *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 949.

Although prayer is only commanded of man, Heschel believes that “[w]e are not alone in our acts of praise. Wherever there is life, there is silent worship. The world is always on the verge of becoming one in adoration.”²⁵ In order to back up this statement, Heschel turns to the psalms which are part of the Psukei D’zimra service. Psalm 148:3 reads, “Praise him, sun and moon / Praise him, all you shining stars.”²⁶ Further, Psalm 145:10 says of G-d that “All Thy works praise Thee.”²⁷ According to Kimelman, verse 10 of Ashrei serves as a bridge between the second and third stanzas of the psalm, and thus as the transition between the Jewish community recognizing G-d and the entire universe recognizing G-d.²⁸ This is also reflected in the unit of psalms in Psukei D’zimra; from psalm 146 to psalm 150, the being praising G-d moved “from the self, [to] the community, and [to] the world.”²⁹

Heschel also discusses the human being as a bio-psychic entity. According to Heschel, “The body is the discipline, the pattern, the law; the spirit is the inner devotion, spontaneity, freedom. The body without the spirit is a corpse; the spirit without the body is a ghost.”³⁰ Although no specific prayer is cited, this is shown in the juxtaposition of *Asher Yatzar* and *Elohai N’shama* in the liturgy. According to Boyarin, *Asher Yatzar* shows human recognition that the body is one of G-d’s wonders and thus requires blessing, even when the act that usually prompts this blessing—utilizing the facility—is

²⁵ Heschel, 82.

²⁶ Ibid., 81.

²⁷ Ibid., 82.

²⁸ Reuven Kimelman, “*Ashrei* – Psalm 145 and the Liturgy” (unpublished manuscript), 7.

²⁹ Kimelman, “*Pesukei De-Zimrah*,” 22.

³⁰ Heschel, 65.

seen as a dirty act.³¹ Because this blessing is juxtaposed *Elohai N'shama*, the blessing over souls, the physical is fused with the spiritual.

The focus of *Man's Quest for G-d* is the issue of prayer in the modern day. However, in discussing this point, Heschel often uses examples from the liturgy. As such, he becomes a theologian of the liturgy periodically throughout his book. This fact makes him superior to Berkovits in this aspect, but he is far from being the best of the three.

According to Joseph B. Soloveitchik, prayer “is a mode of representing a sublime mood through sensuous forms, a kind of physical portraiture of miscible, mingled experiences. Prayer is the tale of an aching and yearning heart.”³² That is to say, even though much of prayer is made up of petitions, “[t]he basic function of prayer is not its physical consequences but the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of G-d and man.”³³ As such, prayer is not one of the mitzvot which can be fulfilled simply by going through the motions without intention of performing a mitzvah; as far as prayer is concerned, “the physical performance divorced from the inner experience is worthless.”³⁴

In *Worship of the Heart*, Soloveitchik states that ““The physical deed of reciting a fixed text serves only as a medium through which the experience finds its objectification and concentration.”³⁵ However, for something that is simply a medium, Soloveitchik spends much of his book discussing the text; two chapters are dedicated to the Shema and its preceding blessings, and another chapter is dedicated to the Amidah.

³¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 34.

³² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* (Hoboken: KTAV, 2003), 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

Soloveitchik's analysis of the Shema is solidly rooted in classical commentary. The analysis begins with a reference to *Hilkhot Keri'at Shema 1:1*, in which "Maimonides, in defining the essence of *kabbalat ol malkhut Shamayim*, pointed to the first three verses of Shema, which contain three precepts: 1) G-d is one; 2) love of G-d; 3) ... the study of Torah."³⁶ Reuven Kimelman, in both his essay "The Shema Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation" and the Jewish Liturgy class at Brandeis University, states the same idea: "The Shema verse... sets forth the duty of acknowledging the Unity of G-d. The next verse... sets forth the duty of loving G-d totally. The remaining verses... are all subsumed under the duty of studying His words."³⁷ Soloveitchik also traces the silent verse of the Shema to Jacob's deathbed via midrashim,³⁸ thus concluding that "[t]he reading of Shema is a dialogue between the ages, the continual restaging of the historic meeting of Jacob and his sons..."³⁹ In his discussion of the blessings preceding Shema, Soloveitchik concludes that "Both the stars, acted upon by mechanical forces, and the angels, motivated by love and awe of G-d, are instruments of the absolute ethico-cosmic will,"⁴⁰ thus connecting the blessings to Shema's overpowering theme that G-d is one. This, too, is parallel to Kimelman's commentary; in his essay, he concludes that "'By including references to the past as well as to the present, to heaven as well as earth, the liturgy presents the whole from the perspective of an omniscient narrator'"⁴¹-- the "omniscient narrator" referring to G-d. Soloveitchik, however, fails to analyze the entire Shema. Where is his analysis of the

³⁶ Ibid., 107.

³⁷ Kimelman, "The Shema Liturgy," 7.

³⁸ Soloveitchik, 110.

³⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁴¹ Kimelman, "The Shema Liturgy," 18.

biblical paragraphs that comprise the Shema? Whereas Kimelman notes that the three paragraphs of the Shema “[make] the point that the love of g-d is inextricably bound up with complying with all His commandments,”⁴² this point is nowhere in Soloveitchik’s paragraphs on Shema.

Soloveitchik, however, does highlight Judaism’s view that humans are a bio-psychic entity. According to Soloveitchik, “Judaism does not preach forgetfulness of the body.... The whole of man, body and spirit, nature and consciousness, must be engaged in the love of G-d, in the clear quest for Being.”⁴³ This is also a point which has been emphasized in The Jewish Liturgy. One of the first prayers in the Shacharit service is Asher Yetzer, which thanks G-d for creating our bodies in working order.⁴⁴ According to Boyarin, this prayer shows human recognition that the body is one of G-d’s wonders and thus requires blessing, even when the act that usually prompts this blessing—utilizing the facility—is seen as a dirty act.⁴⁵ Because this blessing is juxtaposed with the blessing over pure souls, the physical is fused with the spiritual. Kimelman also points out that “the liturgy of the Sabbath states that those who taste the pleasure of the Sabbath will merit [eternal] life.”⁴⁶ This pleasure is not limited to pleasures of the soul, which are hard to define, but also refers to physical pleasures such as eating good food and having sexual relations. Soloveitchik, however, extends this pleasure to things which do not directly deal with the body; according to him, “every phenomenon is born out of a Divine actus that is creative and primordial, willed and filled with meaning, and which cannot be

⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴³ Soloveitchik, 41.

⁴⁴ Scherman, 14.

⁴⁵ Boyarin, 34.

⁴⁶ Kimelman, “The Rabbinic Theology of the Physical,” 950.

separated from His eternal will.”⁴⁷ This is also emphasized by Kimelman, who discusses at length the many blessings which are said upon experiencing pleasures such as seeing a rainbow or smelling a sweet fragrance.⁴⁸

It is in his discussion of the Amidah, however, where Soloveitchik falters. In the beginning of the chapter, Soloveitchik decides to follow the traditional sectional breakdown of the Amidah: “The first three benedictions comprise praise (*shevah*) the middle benedictions comprise supplication and petition; and the last three benedictions comprise acknowledgement and thanksgiving.”⁴⁹ Although this division is based in the Talmud, Kimelman finds fault in it. According to Kimelman, “The validity of a division based on the distinction between praise/thanksgiving, and petition, however, is questionable.... Praise, thanksgiving, and petition too often presume and entail each other to allow for unqualified categorical distinctions.”⁵⁰ Soloveitchik agrees with this later in the chapter—“There is no prayer without petition and supplication.”⁵¹—but this is not enough for him to disagree with the traditional interpretation. His view on the overall theme of the Amidah also differs from that of Kimelman. According to Soloveitchik, the Amidah is all about sacrifice, as “[t]he very gesture of falling before G-d and acknowledging his unlimited sovereignty and man’s utter impotence constitutes an act of sacrifice.”⁵² In this scheme of things, the opening three blessings can be described as follows:

When man appears before the great G-d, the G-d of *hesed*, he is joyful and happy. When he encounters the mighty G-d, he is filled with dread. When he praises the awesomeness of G-d, he is prepared to surrender everything to Him.⁵³

⁴⁷ Soloveitchik, 123.

⁴⁸ Kimelman, “The Rabbinic Theology of the Physical,” 949.

⁴⁹ Soloveitchik, 150.

⁵⁰ Kimelman, “The Amidah,” 4-5.

⁵¹ Soloveitchik, 173.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 164.

Thus, the middle blessings are the sacrifice, and in the second-to-last blessing, *Retzeh*, “[man] asks G-d to accept the great sacrifice he has just offered, to accept his being that is returned to G-d, cleaving unto the Infinite and connecting itself to the Divine throne.”⁵⁴ This also contradicts Soloveitchik’s original break-down of the Amidah, since it places the petition for acceptance in one of the final three blessings. Kimelman provides a different theme for the Amidah: the theme of redemption. According to Kimelman, “the Amidah advances from personal (4-7) through national (10-15) to universal redemption (18), each stage involving the progressive realization of divine sovereignty.”⁵⁵ This dispute between Soloveitchik’s perception of the Amidah and that of Kimelman, however, does not need to factor into the evaluation of Soloveitchik as a theologian of the liturgy. Although he both disagrees with Kimelman and contradicts himself in his analysis of the Amidah, his analysis of liturgy as a whole is rooted in solid analysis and Talmudic precedent. Much of his analysis also runs parallel to things taught in *The Jewish Liturgy* at Brandeis University, and thus is adequate as an analysis of liturgy as compared both to what has been taught in class and the other theologians.

As seen in this paper, Berkovits, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik all have very similar views on prayer, but, they differ in their methods of analysis. Berkovits analyzes prayer mostly through his own analysis, with a few psalms providing extra evidence. Heschel, on the other hand, bases his analysis both on his own views and the liturgy itself. Soloveitchik, however, devotes several chapters of his book to the various parts of the service and analyzes prayer through the liturgy. Thus, out of these three theologians, Soloveitchik serves as the best theologian of the liturgy.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁵ Kimelman, “The Amidah,” 0.

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