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HUMANS BLESSING GOD — A MYSTICAL IDEA AND MODERN IMPLICATIONS

This essay will explore an Aramaic translation of a verse in Exodus and the meaning of an obscure term used by Nahmanides. This will lead to an examination of whether our *berakhot*¹ and performance of the commandments in general should be considered “divine needs.” This discussion will develop into an analysis of the tension between human freedom and divine sovereignty. The thinkers reviewed throughout the essay will argue their positions strongly. While I believe that the debates are real, their reconciliation is essential for a true understanding of the relationship between man and God.

I

The Aramaic translation (*targum*) of the Torah by Onkelos has been read by Jews for centuries and is canonically printed alongside the biblical verses. Undoubtedly, the most well-known line of his translation is at the end of the *Shirat Ha-Yam* (the song sung by Israel after the splitting of the sea) – “The Lord will reign forever and ever!” (Exodus 15:18). This *targum* is familiar liturgically because it appears in the *U-Va Le-Tsi'on* prayer, as well as in the *Shirat Ha-Yam* section read during *Pesukei De-Zimra*.

Onkelos translates the verse as “The Lord’s kingdom is established forever and ever.” He changes the verb “reign” to the noun “kingdom,” and more significantly, he switches from future to present tense.

While Onkelos was likely making a grammatical point,² he communicated a theological message as well. In line with classical Greek philosophy,

¹ *Berakhot*, while generally translated as “blessings” or “benedictions” (*berakha* in the singular), has multiple meanings supported by a variety of other legitimate translations (depending on the context), including: gifts, benefits, and praises. Since I am trying to show that the common understanding of *berakhot* is an oversimplification, I will frequently use the Hebrew transliteration.

² As suggested by Rafael B. Posen in his commentary on Onkelos (*Parshegen: Be'urim, Perushim u-Mekorot le-Targum Onkelos: Exodus* (Jerusalem: Mekhon

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in which anything that changes is essentially imperfect,³ use of the future tense implies that an event has not yet occurred. If God will be reigning “then,” it follows that He has changed from how He is “now.” Onkelos frequently translates biblical phrases about God in such a way as to avoid anthropomorphism, so perhaps here too he was concerned about readers misunderstanding of the nature of God as subject to change.

Nahmanides, however, believed Onkelos had theological motivations:

Onkelos was apprehensive [of translating this verse literally, which is stated in a future tense], since God’s sovereignty is [indeed] for all eternity. Therefore, he rendered it in the present tense: “The Lord’s kingdom is established forever and ever,” just as is expressed in the verse, “Your Kingdom is a Kingdom for all ages” (Psalms 145:13). But I have not understood Onkelos’ opinion in this matter, for it is written: “May the Glory of the Eternal endure forever” (Psalms 104:31), “And let the whole earth be filled with His Glory” (Psalms 72:19), “Magnified and sanctified shall be [His great Name]” (Kaddish prayer), “Let it be established, and let Your Name be magnified forever” (I Chronicles 17:24). It is possible that the meaning of these [future tenses] is similar to the secret of the benedictions (*sod ha-berakhot*).⁴

According to Nahmanides, Onkelos was concerned that if God’s kingdom were described as eternal by using the future tense, it would appear as if His reign is currently lacking or incomplete. To refute this view, Nahmanides presents verses that include prophecies (or prayers) regarding God’s reign in the future, evidence that our verse is a request for the future, not praise of God in the present.⁵ Following these proofs, Nahmanides

Parshegen, 2014), on Exodus 15:18. While the biblical Hebrew verb tenses did not always align with the times they describe (past, present, future), in the rabbinic Hebrew with which Onkelos was familiar they did. Hence, perhaps Onkelos was trying to express the original meaning of the text in a way that could be understood as “God will be reigning forever,” parallel to the “future continuous” tense in English. For other examples in which the Targum converts the verb to the appropriate tense, see *Parshegen* on Exodus 1:12.

³ This is true of the philosophies of both Plato, who claimed that physical things are mere images of eternal forms, and Aristotle, who promoted the idea of an “unmoved mover” – the first cause who can never change.

⁴ Nahmanides on Exodus 15:18.

⁵ Indeed, Hizkuni and Seforno, in their commentaries here, turn the verse literally into a prayer, by prefacing it with “May it be [your] will...” However, Shadal, in his commentary on the verse, claims that for the verse to be a prayer (or even a prophecy) the verb (reign) would need to precede the subject (God). Since the subject precedes

adds the mysterious sentence, “It is possible that the meaning” – of these future tenses – “is like the secret (*sod*) *ha-berakhot*.”⁶ What is “*sod ha-berakhot*”?

I could not discover any commentators that satisfactorily explained what Nahmanides meant. Perhaps, though, a hint can be found in the responsum of Rashba, a student of Nahmanides. He was asked what is the meaning of our *berakhot*, and if human beings can actually bless God. This is his reply:

You asked me, “What is the nature of *berakhot*? For a *berakha* is an increase of goodness, and what can a servant add to his master?” Indeed, the term *berakha* does mean increase and addition,⁷ deriving from the phrase *bereikhot mayim* [pools of water]. And in the essence of *berakhot* there is a deep secret, and it will be understood by one to whom God has granted [the ability] to reveal the secret of the Torah.⁸

Rashba argues that humans (the servants) can in fact contribute to their divine master. Therefore, *berakhot* involve increase and addition, even to God. His etymology of *berakha* as deriving from “pools of water” refers to the constant increase of natural springs. His use of the phrases “secret of the Torah” and “deep secret (*sod*)” makes it likely that this is the very same “*sod haberakhot*” mentioned by Nahmanides.

However, others claim that *berakhot* toward God do not refer to any sort of “increase,” but rather are a form of praise.⁹ In his novella to *Berakhot* 7a, Rashba discusses the aggadic episode in which God asks high priest Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha to bless Him. R. Yishmael responds with a prayer for an increase of God’s mercy (and notably not with praises of

the verb, it should be viewed as a poetic turn of phrase, focusing on the eternity of God’s reign.

⁶ Nahmanides uses cryptic language here, and as we will see, his students, some of whom will present opposing or conflicting opinions about the topic, do likewise. The opacity is understandable, as we are discussing the controversial issue of God’s nature in general and God’s “vulnerability” in particular. (See *Sefer Ha-Hinukh* on the commandment to bless God, Deuteronomy 8:10, where the author expresses great hesitancy before approaching the topic.) However, for the sake of clarity (and brevity) in this article, I will present these thinkers’ more “extreme” positions alone.

⁷ Earlier, Rashi on *Sota* 10a writes that *berakha* in the Bible always means increase.

⁸ *Teshuvot ha-Rashba* I:23.

⁹ This is the position of Hizkuni on Genesis 24:27; Radak, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, *berakha*; and Abarbanel’s commentary to Genesis 27.

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God).¹⁰ Based on this passage, Rashba rejects the approach that *berakhot* to God are praises:

Regarding Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, to whom God said “Bless Me,” do not disregard this, for it is the essence of all *berakhot*, and of this we were commanded in His perfect Torah, “you shall bless the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 8:10) ... And do not think that *berakha* means “praise,” for *berakha* is an expression of increase and addition, as it says, “He will bless (*barekh*) your bread and your water” (Exodus 23:25).

The Bible contains different forms of *berakhot*. God blesses man and nations, people bless other people, and God blesses non-human objects, such as bread and water. According to Rashba, just as we cannot say that when God blesses bread and water that He “praises” them, but rather increases and multiplies them, so too man blessing God is a form of “increase,” in a manner of speaking.¹¹

Rashba only hints at the “secret” that man can assist and contribute to God, but his student, Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher, says so explicitly in a number of places. In the introduction to his commentary on *Zot Ha-Berakha* (Deuteronomy 33), he writes:

God desires the *berakhot* of man, and He has commanded us in this, as it says, “You shall bless the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 8:10).

Later in that chapter (33:26) he continues:

The Sages wrote in the Midrash (Eikha Rabbati 1:6), “When Israel performs God’s will, they add strength to the heavenly power, as it is written (Psalms 108:14), “We will cause God to be strong.” When, however, Israel is not performing God’s will, they [weaken the great heavenly strength] as it is written (Deuteronomy 32:18), “You have weakened the Rock that bore you.”

¹⁰ R. Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim* 2:2. See also his *Ru’ah Hayyim* commentary on *Avot* 4:4.

¹¹ I recognize that in Hebrew, the noun *berakha* and the verb *barekh* can have different meanings based on the context. There are verses (like Psalms 145:2) that clearly identify *barekh* as a parallel with “praise.” Moreover, the plain meaning of Deuteronomy 8:10 also likely refers to giving thanks. However, this essay is not attempting to provide literal translations of biblical verses, but rather to understand how the rabbis understood the concept of *berakha*. We can see from the sources quoted in this essay that as far back as the Talmudic period, they fused the distinct biblical concepts of divine needs and blessing God into one.

The midrash states that we strengthen God when we perform the commandments, and weaken God when we violate them. According to R. Bahya, this indicates that God is dependent on man. Therefore, He desires our *berakhot*, and even commands us to bless Him.¹²

Nahmanides and his students claim we serve God (by performing the commandments) not only for human benefit, but also for *tsorekh gavo'a* – a divine need.¹³ In other words, our actions influence God. Just as when God blesses humans, we receive benefit from God, so too when humans bless God (as commanded), God benefits from our actions (as it were). This is the “secret of *berakhot*” that Nahmanides mentioned above, namely that when we confer *berakhot* to God, we help complete His kingdom on earth.

With the publication of the Zohar in the 13th century, kabalistic thought became more widespread among the general public, and discussion of man’s effect on God became more explicit.¹⁴ In addition to the Zohar, we can see these ideas expressed in the writings of Lurianic kabbalists, of the Hasidic movement, and of Lithuanian scholars such as R. Chaim of Volozhin.

II

Despite the proliferation of this approach, it was not without controversy. For if God receives a contribution from man, then one can conclude that God was deficient beforehand. This challenges the principle of divine perfection. Maimonides, in *The Guide for the Perplexed* (3:13), strongly opposes this possibility:

¹² See also *Kad Ha-Kemah*, Berakha; his commentaries to Exodus 29:46, Numbers 14:17, and Deuteronomy 8:10; and particularly *Shulhan Shel Arba*, Sha’ar 1, 488-489 (in *Kitvei Rabbeinu Bahya*, ed. C. Chavel. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1970), where he uses the phrase *sod ha-berakhot*.

¹³ The term *tsorekh gavo'a*, used in this sense, first appears in the commentary of Nahmanides on Exodus 29:46, discussing God’s presence in Israel. Various thinkers viewed the literalness of the phrase differently, particularly as kabalistic thought progressed. We will see some of those uses in the continuation of this essay. For further discussion, see Daniel Matt, “The Mystic and the Mizwot,” in *Jewish Spirituality, From the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. by Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 367-404.

¹⁴ For a description of this process, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 250-271, and Yaacob Dweck, *The Scandal of Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-10.

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For He, may He be exalted, would not acquire additional perfection if He were worshipped by all that He has created and were truly apprehended by them, nor would He lose anything if nothing existed except Him... Accordingly, you will find that the Sages of Israel have inserted into the text of their prayers: “You have set man apart from the beginning and acknowledged him that he should stand before You. Yet who shall say unto You, what You are to do? And if he be righteous, what boon is this to You?”

Earlier, Rashba answered the question, “what can a servant add to his master?” by saying there is “increase and addition” in regards to *berakhot*. Maimonides, however, gives the opposite answer, saying our service and worship of God does not add to His perfection, and brings proof from the Ne’ila prayer that man’s actions have no influence on God.

Maharal relates to the above-quoted excerpt from the *Guide* in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, *Derekh Hayyim*, and in his opposition to the approach of the school of Nahmanides, goes even further than Maimonides.

The final teaching of *Pirkei Avot* says:

Everything that the Holy One, Blessed be He, created in this world, He created only for His honor (*kavod*), as it says (Isaiah 43:7): “Every one that is called by My name, and whom I have created for My honor [*kavod*], I have formed him, yes, I have made him.” And it also says (Exodus 15:18), “The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.” (*Avot* 6:11).

In the *Guide*, Maimonides interprets the word *kavod* as *ratson* - “will,” meaning that everything was created by the will of God. According to Maimonides, God does not receive honor from His creations, and so has no need for it. In fact, according to Maimonides, the misplaced idea that God desires honor the way human kings do is the origin of idolatry¹⁵. Therefore, Maimonides reinterprets that passage in *Pirkei Avot*

¹⁵ Maimonides provides the following history of idolatry: “In the days of Enosh, humans made a great error... This was their error. They said, ‘Since God created these stars and the spheres that guide the world ... it is fitting to praise them, glorify them and treat them with honor [*kavod*]. This is the will of God, blessed be He, that they make great and honor those whom God made great and honored, like the king who desires to honor those who stand before him and this is the honor of the king.’ Since this matter arose in their hearts, they began to build temples to the stars, made sacrifices to them, praised and glorified them in words and bowed down before them in order to obtain favor of the Creator. This is the essence of idolatry” (*Laws of Idolatry* 1:1).

as referring to God's will, so readers will not erroneously believe they must honor God in improper ways.¹⁶

In *Derekh Hayyim*, Maharal initially challenges the approach presented by R. Bahya and others, who claimed that our sins weaken God. On the contrary, states Maharal, when man sins, and God in His role as king punishes the sinner, then precisely via that punishment God's name is made great and sanctified.¹⁷

However, he goes on to disagree with Maimonides as well. Maharal, following the literal meaning of the passage in *Avot*, says there is no reason for us to assume God does not receive honor. He quotes a number of additional rabbinic sources that describe giving honor to God. Nevertheless, he concludes, God receiving honor does not harm His perfection, since in any case, everything man does is against his will:

The point that Maimonides finds so difficult, that God receives honor from mankind, is addressed by the Rabbis in the Mishna (*Avot* 4:29), "against your will you were created; against your will you were born; against your will you live; against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give an account before the King of kings." This comes to teach that nothing originates on the side of man, but rather everything is from God, and therefore God receives nothing from mankind. If everything was not imposed upon man, then God would receive honor from mankind. But that is not the case, rather everything is imposed upon man. Therefore, it is not fitting to say that God receives anything from mankind, but rather man receives from God.

Maharal maintains that if the human will had the independent power to create, then he could give an honest and independent gift to God, but since this is not the case,¹⁸ man can only receive and not give. Man should

¹⁶ For more on the meaning of divine *kavod* in Maimonides, see Don Seeman, "Honoring the Divine as Virtue and Practice in Maimonides," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 16:2 (2008), 195-251. Seeman, 241, writes that this (and neighboring) sections of the *Guide* "combat the view that the world was created in order to open a space for divine service from which God too would benefit, as in the theurgist's credo that 'human service is a divine need', which was popularized by the school of Nahmanides."

¹⁷ In his *Gur Aryeh* commentary to Deuteronomy 32:18, Maharal addresses the Midrash quoted by R. Bahya above, and writes that it refers to the effect of the sin on man, not God. When man is no longer worthy of receiving benefits from God, it is as if God no longer has anyone to give to, which makes it appear as if His strength is weakened.

¹⁸ For further examples of this approach in Maharal, see his commentary on *Avot* 4:29 and his *Hiddushei Agaddot on Avoda Zara* 2b, where he interprets the midrash

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be considered a dependent being whose actions might be desired by his creator, but are still controlled by Him.

Regarding our question about blessing God, Maharal states explicitly in his discussion of the story about Rabbi Yishmael the High Priest, “God does not receive blessings from His creations, heaven forbid to say such a thing.”¹⁹

III

A new focus of contention soon overshadowed these medieval debates. The Jewish world now confronted the challenges of modernity and the Enlightenment. One might expect that the rabbis who dealt with these challenges head on, not ignoring the advance of scientific thought, would be the least likely to identify with an ostensibly mystical approach that describes God as dependent on man. Yet, that is precisely what we find in the writings of three of the rabbis most identified with this “modern” approach: Samson Raphael Hirsch, Abraham Isaac Kook, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

R. Hirsch accepts Maharal’s association of independent free will and man’s ability to contribute to God, but reaches the opposite conclusion. In his commentary on Genesis 9:17, where God is first described as *barukh* (blessed), he writes:

The understanding of this term [*barukh*] has been confused because people have objected to taking this word “to bless,” referring from man to God, in the same meaning as it has when used from God to man. It has been taken to be adjectival, like *rahum* [merciful], *hanun* [compassionate], so that, like these, it designates the active source, the holder of blessing as of pity and grace²⁰. But that does not get us much further, we are constantly called upon *le-varekh* [to bless] God ... If man is active in blessing God, then God must be blessed in a passive sense, He must be receiving blessing from man, one cannot get away from it. And why should one have to try and get away from it? At the moment that God made the fulfillment of His will on earth dependent on the free decision of Man He said to them *barkheni*, bless Me, further My purposes, fulfill My wishes, realize My will, bless My work, the achievement of which on

that God held Mt. Sinai over the heads of Israel and coerced them to accept the Torah. Maharal claims this was more than coercion via fear of punishment – they did not have the independent free will to reject the Torah.

¹⁹ Be’er Ha-Golah, Be’er 4.

²⁰ This is the approach of Albo in *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, II:26.

earth I have laid in your hands ...The whole Torah teaches us nothing else other than how we can *mevarekh* [bless] God and that we are to do so. Taking it to mean to praise or thank God, loses the true conception of blessing God. Those praises become *berakhot* when they effect their real work on ourselves; if they direct our minds into the right channels, lift our hearts, and so further the work that God expects us to accomplish on ourselves.

R. Hirsch emphasizes that the traditional understanding of blessings to God as “praise” or “thanksgiving” is only partially true. Only if by praising and thanking God we change ourselves and fulfill God’s mission for us, then can He in turn become truly blessed, receiving a contribution from us that He would otherwise be lacking. While Hirsch does not identify with the kabalistic view of the metaphysical impact of the mitzvot, and does not use the phrase *tsorekh gavo’a*, he does make it clear that God has goals for the world, and is dependent on man to fulfill them.

R. Kook addresses the subject in *Orot Ha-Kodesh*. Though his language is poetic and esoteric (and unlike Hirsch, full of kabalistic terminology), his allusions to phrases found in earlier sources make his position clear. He presents the question using similar phrasing to that found in Rashba’s responsum, namely, “What can be added to the infinite?”²¹ His solution is that while there is an aspect of God that is perfect and unchanging (*shelemut*), there is an additional aspect that is improving and increasing (*bishtalmut*). As this latter process lacks an English equivalent, I will use Jerome Gellman’s coinage – “perfectionization.”²² R. Kook maintains that since *berakha* is defined as increase, by allowing perfectionization, God can receive *berakha* as well.

In this same passage, R. Kook uses the phrase “*tsorekh gavo’a*,” which refers to a divine need:

The purpose of existence as a whole, by the hidden desire of the Infinite, as it is revealed to us, is a great plan for an eternal ascent and increment. If there were not a reality of smallness and deficiency, there could only be greatness and completeness but not growth, a consistent drive for increased *berakha*. Even though there is no end to the greatness of complete perfection to which there is no need for ascent, included in complete

²¹ Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1964), 528.

²² Jerome Gellman, “The God of the Jews and the Jewish God,” in *The Routledge Companion to Theism*, ed. Charles Taliaferro, Victoria S. Harrison, Stewart Goetz. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 50-51.

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perfection is this lofty power for growth. This is considered as if the absolute perfection is completed by the perfectionization, that comes by a manifestation of the small that grows toward the great and this work is a *tsorekh gavo'a* [divine need].²³

He adds that denying God the ability to receive *berakha* would be a deficiency:

We understand in the Absolute divine perfections, two values of perfection. One value of perfection, because of its greatness and completeness, has no association with increment. However, if there were not a possibility of increase this itself would be a deficiency. Because the Perfection which progresses and increases consistently has an extra, transcendental pleasure, a certain height that we yearn for, to grow from power to power, and therefore the divine perfection could not miss this advantage of increment.²⁴

He then alludes to a Talmudic passage (*Bava Metsia* 114a) which compares the laws of consecration of property to the Temple treasury (*hekdesb*) to giving a loan. The question arises: must a pledge to *hekdesb* be returned if the donor needs it, in the same way that it must be returned if a debtor used it as collateral? The Talmud quotes the verses that teach this law:

If he is a needy man, you shall not go to sleep with his pledge; you must return the pledge to him at sundown, that he may sleep in his cloth and bless you; and it will be to your merit before the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 24:12-13).

The Talmud then suggests that we might initially think that the pledge need not be returned, since *hekdesb* does not need the *berakha* promised in the verse. But after quoting Deuteronomy 8:10 (“you shall bless the Lord your God”), the Talmud concludes that *hekdesb*, i.e., God, does indeed need *berakha*. The discussion ends with the conclusion that the pledge does not need to be returned because God does not need the “merit” mentioned in the end of the verse.

R. Kook uses this talmudic discussion to indicate to us that God does need *berakha*:

Days will come when the light of God will be revealed in all its majestic fullness, and precisely then all will recognize that there will be “a place of understanding” for the blessed wholeness, which the Sanctified (*hekdesb*)

²³ Kook, 530.

²⁴ Ibid, 532.

itself requires, when a richer, supernal wholeness is to be found. And the Sanctified has need of *berakha* but has no need of charity.

He then concludes the chapter:

To the Infinite light, increase and ascent are not pertinent from its own aspect, but in truth, it cannot be that the advantage of eternal ascent will be lacking from the complete perfection. This is the doctrine of existence, the appearance of the living and experiential lights. There is an impression of descent, in this way, so that world will have the option of increase and ascent ... This unification will increase light and the advantage will not cease, with constant *berakha*, for the content of this *berakha* is ascent.²⁵

According to R. Kook, God's need to increase appears to us as a "descent," but it is actually part of God's ultimate perfection.²⁶ And what is this ascent dependent on? Man's free will:

The center of the world is free will, which ascends and becomes in all its freedom, its own noble attribute, mighty and constant in its action toward steady good, rising ever higher. This entity is the human figure, whose entire soul sends out its lines in every place and manner that has a vessel suited to its light.²⁷

R. Soloveitchik also discusses the issue, but as he frequently does, with an emphasis on tension and dialectic. In "*Berakhot* in Judaism,"²⁸ he claims there are two different aspects to God – "influencing" and "influenced":

The *shekhina* [God's presence in this world] is precluded from revealing itself, and so she represents the feminine trait, that of a "king held captive in the tresses [of His beloved]" (Song of Songs 7:6). Man needs to release the "holy queen" from her chains, from the concealment, from the thick cloud, so that her radiance can enlighten the world. The Master of the

²⁵ Ibid, 534.

²⁶ These passages demonstrate R. Kook's optimistic belief in the progress of humanity, and are followed by a chapter expressing his view of the theory of evolution, which similarly relies on the idea that the perfect can continue to improve.

²⁷ Kook, 560.

²⁸ Published in *Yemei Zikaron*, trans. Moshe Krone (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1986), 36-37. A slightly different version appears in English, in Arnold Lustiger's *Derashot Harav: Selected Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Edison, NJ: Ohr Publishing, 2003), 2-12. Lustiger points out in his introduction that Krone included some material that was not in the original oral presentation.

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Universe is completely omnipotent, with the exception of His revelation²⁹. Regarding His revelation, we, mankind, are the influencers, and the *shekhina* is, so to speak, the influenced. With this is expressed the principle of free will, as the Sages said, “Everything is in the hands of heaven, except for the fear of heaven (*yirat shamayim*)” (*Berakhot* 33b) And what is *yirat shamayim* if not *re'iyat shamayim* (seeing heaven)?

According to R. Soloveitchik (like R. Hirsch), the formulated *berakhot*, that is the benedictions that we say before and after eating or performing *mitsvot*, fulfill the real meaning of *berakhot* as “gifts,” when they increase God’s presence in the world by revealing His presence - the *shekhina*:

When does man revere God? When he senses His presence and discovers Him, when it is man, himself, who is the revealer [of God]. Revelation of the *shekhina* is dependent and conditional on man himself. A man may, if he chooses to, search and find Him in every phenomenon, time and place – from the morning sunrise through the evening sunset, in the seas and the growth in the field, in the night stars and the sand of the seashore, in everything that surrounds him and is within him ... And so, when a Jew eats his meal, after he says the words of the blessing “*barukh atah*” (blessed are you) the *shekhina* becomes present and appears with every slice of fruit, with every blossom, with every sip of water, with every movement of the hand – with all of these he reveals the creator of the world. And so it is with every phenomenon and object – “You” are before me always. Consequently, the blessing “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28) is fulfilled, the *shekhina* expands, the increase in goodness and holiness continues to grow, and the Master of the World unites with His world.³⁰

IV

While R. Hirsch, R. Kook, and R. Soloveitchik disagree with Maharal on whether it is possible to give a *berakha* to God, they all ultimately agree

²⁹ Lustiger, 8, has an even stronger version: “Although it rings heretical to assert, man must provide ‘assistance,’ as it were, to the Master of the Universe. Man must ‘help’ God to reveal His presence in the world.”

³⁰ For a more cautious take on R. Soloveitchik’s position in this essay, see Lawrence Kaplan, “Kabbalistic Motifs in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik” [in Hebrew], in *Emunah Bi-Zemanim Mishtanim*, ed. Avi Sagi (Jerusalem: Department of Culture and Jewish Education of the World Zionist Organization, 1996), 75-93. Kaplan says that despite using kabalistic terminology, R. Soloveitchik did not accept the radical kabalistic ideas.

that human free will is correlated with divine passivity. But where does Maimonides fit into this? On the one hand, he would reject Maharal's negation of independent free will, but on the other hand, he clearly objects to God being presented as vulnerable at all.

For Maimonides, free will was the bedrock of his system of belief. He went so far as to interpret the Talmudic phrase "fear of heaven" (from "Everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven") as meaning human free will in its entirety, so God does not have control over human choices.³¹ Through this freedom comes moral responsibility, justice and the possibility of repentance.

Maimonides differs from Rabbis Hirsch, Kook, and Soloveitchik in how each views human freedom. Human freedom is a critical belief for all, but their definition of it varies.

One way to understand these divergent views of freedom is to look at their positions on what appears to be an unrelated issue: *ta'amei ha-mitsvot* (the reasons for the commandments). Most rabbis focus on the inherent value to the commandments. But in the third section of the *Guide*, Maimonides gives historical, "instrumentalist" reasons for the commandments. He explains many of the commandments as reactions to the idolatrous practices of the time the Torah was given, particularly those related to the service of God in the Temple.³²

Despite their great respect for Maimonides as a master of Jewish law, these three modern rabbis all attack Maimonides for his position on *ta'amei hamitsvot*. This is not coincidental.

In the 18th letter of his *Nineteen Letters*, R. Hirsch criticizes Maimonides's approach:

The Mitzvoth became for him merely ladders, necessary only to conduct to knowledge or to protect against error, often only the temporary and limited error of polytheism ... All this having no foundation in the eternal essence of things, not resulting from their eternal demand on me, or from my eternal purpose and task, no eternal symbolizing of an unchangeable idea, and not inclusive enough to form a basis for the totality of the commandments³³.

³¹ Introduction to Commentary on *Pirkei Avot* ("Shemonah Perakim"), 8:6.

³² Nahmanides has a complicated approach to *ta'amei ha-mitsvot*, sometimes agreeing with the approach of Maimonides (Commentary on Deuteronomy 22:6), and sometimes strongly attacking him (Commentary on Leviticus 1:9). For the purposes of this essay, his commentary on Genesis 2:8 is particularly interesting, where he writes, "by means of the sacrifices, *berakha* emanates to the higher powers."

³³ R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel*, trans. Bernard Drachman (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1899), 182-83.

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For him, the purpose of the commandments according to Maimonides is only to attain knowledge of God or to avoid the errors of idolatry. R. Hirsch rejects this in favor of an approach that makes eternal demands on us, and will remain unchangeable forever. He was even willing to ask if Moses Maimonides is loyal to the path of the biblical Moses:

“Is Moses the son of Maimon ... really identical with Moses the son of Amram?”

While R. Hirsch bemoaned Maimonides’s view that the commandments were “merely ladders,” R. Kook complained that Maimonides relegated the commandments to the past. As he writes in *Talelei Orot*:

The first one to brighten our horizon by probing the reasons for the commandments was Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. But how surprising it will be for us to assess the impression all his thoughts concerning the “reasons for the commandments” registered on the people generally, and on individuals who investigate religious themes, from his own time to the latest generation! Less than any other conceptual theme in his writings did this subject, the reasons for the commandments, evoke any reaction ... Unless there is added to the past an influence that flows mightily from the farthest past, opening up with vitality to the present, and then reaching out with gathering strength and light toward a brighter future, abounding in idealistic anticipation for a higher life, it is in danger of presenting Judaism in the trappings of archeology.³⁴

Finally, R. Soloveitchik writes in *The Halakhic Mind* that Maimonides was too focused on the question of causality (scientific and historical), too concerned with “how” the commandments came to be:

Judging Maimonides’ undertaking retrospectively, one must admit that the master whose thought shaped Jewish ideology for centuries to come did not succeed in making his interpretation of the commandments prevalent in our world perspective. While we recognize his opinions on more complicated problems such as prophecy, teleology and creation, we completely ignore most of his rational notions regarding the commandments. The reluctance on the part of the Jewish *homo religiosus* to accept Maimonidean rationalistic ideas is not ascribable to any agnostic tendencies, but to the incontrovertible fact that such explanations neither edify nor

³⁴ Translation [with minor emendations] from *Abraham Isaac Kook, The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, ed. and trans. Ben Zion Bokser. (New York: Ramsey and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), 303-304.

inspire the religious consciousness. They are essentially, if not entirely, valueless for the religious interests we have most at heart. Maimonides' failure to impress his rationalistic method upon the vivid religious consciousness is to be attributed mainly to the fact that the central theme of the Maimonidean exposition is the causalistic problem. The "how" question, the explanatory quest, and the genetic attitude determined Maimonides' doctrine of the commandments. Instead of describing, Maimonides explained; instead of reconstructing, he constructed.³⁵

For R. Soloveitchik, any attempt to explain the reasons for the commandments based on historical circumstances would in essence be claiming that God had to react to those events in a particular manner. We dare not make that claim. Humans are limited in their understanding of the divine. The most we can do is describe the nature of the commandments; we should not attempt to explain how they came to be.

These three rabbis provide different reasons for their opposition to the approach of Maimonides to *taamei hamitsvot*. This opposition is as strong as it is surprising, considering their recognition of his greatness in the realm of Jewish law.

By examining Maimonides's position on the reasons for the commandments, we will discover a correlation between his disputants' views of *berakha* and their views of *ta'amei ha-mitsvot*. In the passage from the Guide (3:13) we reviewed earlier, Maimonides says we cannot ascribe to God any need or purpose concerning creation in general, as it would indicate lack. However, in a later chapter (3:25), he does explain that everything in creation has a purpose. His approach to nature is teleological – everything in nature has a purpose (*telos*). Nothing created is "futile, frivolous, or vain."

In the following chapter (3:26), Maimonides uses the same teleological approach to explain the reasons for the commandments. The commandments also have a purpose – they are for the benefit of man, for body, soul or society as a whole. And since their benefit is empirical, there is no intrinsic reason we cannot understand them. Therefore, Maimonides's view of *berakha* suits his view of *ta'amei ha-mitsvot*. God has no deficiency, and therefore can receive no benefit from man's actions. Man does, however, benefit from performing the commandments.³⁶

³⁵ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind* (New York: Seth Press, 1986), 92.

³⁶ For further discussion of the teleological approach of Maimonides, see Eliezer Goldman, "The Commandment as the Basic Datum of Religion" [in Hebrew] in *Expositions and Inquiries: Jewish Thought in Past and Present*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 306-15, particularly 307.

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This teleological approach caused the opposition we have seen. For example, in the continuation of the passage quoted from *The Halakhic Mind*, R. Soloveitchik writes:

The net result of Maimonides' rationalization is that religion no longer operates with unique autonomous norms, but with technical rules, the employment of which would culminate in the attainment of some extraneous maximum bonum. In rationalizing the commandments genetically, Maimonides developed a religious "instrumentalism." Causality reverted to teleology ... and Jewish religion was converted into technical wisdom.³⁷

For R. Soloveitchik, the emphasis placed by Maimonides on the benefit to man of the commandments was misplaced.

A related issue is the question of the details of the specific commandments. The midrash (Genesis Rabbah 44:1) states that God does not care about the details of the commandments, but is only concerned about their benefit for humanity:

For what difference does it make to God whether one [ritually] slaughters an animal from the front or from the back of the neck? Rather, the commandments were only given as a means of refining humanity.

While Maimonides believes (Guide 3:26) that "the generalities of the commandments necessarily have a cause and have been given because of a certain utility," and that with enough study they are understandable, regarding their details he quotes the above midrash, and goes even further:

Those who trouble themselves to find a cause for any of these detailed rules, are in my eyes void of sense: they do not remove any difficulties, but rather increase them. Those who believe that these detailed rules originate in a certain cause, are as far from the truth as those who assume that the whole law is useless.

For Maimonides, it was necessary for God to provide detailed laws regarding some commandments, but those details do not serve an inherent purpose. However, for thinkers who believe that God has needs, such as R. Hirsch ("further My purposes, fulfill My wishes"), and R. Kook ("this work is a *tsorekh gav'oa* [divine need]"), then an approach indicating that God does not care about those details must be rejected. Just as

³⁷ *The Halakhic Mind*, 93.

God needs our *berakha*, He needs our service conducted precisely in the manner He prescribed.³⁸

Yet returning to the issue of free will, there is a more profound lens through which to view their common disagreement with Maimonides: the tension between human freedom and divine intervention.

According to Maimonides, limited divine interaction in our world enhances human free will. In the Laws of Idolatry, he describes how initially the “nation that knew God” did not have commandments, and God only appears in the text passively. Only when their situation deteriorated in Egypt did God take an active role, redeem them from slavery, and give them the commandments to repair the damage done by their exposure to idolatrous beliefs. These commandments were not planned in advance by God, but were a reaction to historical developments, and the perfect God has neither need for nor benefit from their performance.

On the other hand, those who believe in a God with needs argue that, on the contrary, this perception of God grants humans even greater freedom. For those thinkers, man lives in a world where his influence is not limited to the earthly realm. The modern rabbis we quoted saw the full power of science and human initiative, with man literally reaching the heavens. And on a metaphysical level, man can also influence God. That is a much greater freedom, even if it comes at the cost of allowing God greater influence in human affairs. These scholars describe a covenantal relationship, where both sides have needs and can fulfill the other’s desires. To them, the mitzvot are more than just a reaction to unfortunate circumstances, and God does care about the details of their performance. God has a plan for the world, and we are partners in the fulfillment of that plan. And just as we augment God’s power by carrying out His will, our capabilities are also extended in a partnership which enables our freedom to operate in both the human and divine domains.

Some scholars claim that theurgy - the idea that human actions can affect the divine - was introduced to Judaism by medieval kabalistic scholars. However, the concept of an immanent God is found throughout Biblical and Rabbinic literature.³⁹ In fact, it can be convincingly argued

³⁸ In Matt’s “The Mystic and the Mizvot,” 374-375, he quotes a number of early kabalistic writers who make a direct connection between *ta’amei ha-mitsvot* and blessing God. These writers criticize the philosophic approach (like that of Maimonides) to the commandments, and accuse those philosophers as saying “What benefit can He derive from our blessings?” and “Do you think we have to bless God? Does He need this? Foolishness!”

³⁹ The late (and foreign) influences on kabalistic thought are found in many of the writings of Gershom Scholem including his books *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

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that by depicting a completely transcendent God, Maimonides, under the influence of Greek philosophy, was the innovator.

This is not to imply that Maimonides's outlook should be rejected because of its origins. The Jewish people benefited significantly from an approach that placed our fate in our hands. It allowed Judaism to continue to survive in the modern, scientific world and ultimately set the framework for Zionism, which allowed the Jews to break free from the cycle of exile.

Therefore, if we combine the lesson of the power of human free will from Maimonides, together with the divine-human partnership embodied in the *sod haberakhot* of Nahmanides, we will guarantee that our path in history will allow for the day when God will reign forever and ever.

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While the daily repetition of our prayers and blessings makes them advantageously familiar, that familiarity can engender a numbness to the subtleties and tensions that those very words contain. We recite both the original Hebrew and Aramaic translation of Exodus 15:18, without paying attention to the significance of the change in verb tense. We “bless” God, but do not fully consider the significance of man conferring *berakhot* on his Creator. Is God’s perfection so complete that man cannot truly act autonomously? Or does the free will given to us at creation imply a degree of divine vulnerability? The different positions on these issues came to the forefront of Jewish thought in the Middle Ages and continue until this day. There has never been, nor will there ever be, one solitary answer to these questions. But an awareness of the constant tension will ensure that we remain mindful of the complex world that includes both the human and the divine.

(New York, 1961) and *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974) and in Martin Buber’s *Hasidism* (New York, 1948). However, more recent scholarship has challenged this view. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Idel challenges the approach of Scholem and Buber, bringing many examples from earlier rabbinic writings (some of which I have quoted above) that present theurgic views (see chapter 7, “Ancient Jewish Theurgy”). He aptly describes the approach of these midrashim as “augmentation theurgy.”