

Communications

WOMEN'S PRAYER SERVICES/HALAKHIC VALUES AND HALAKHIC DECISIONS

TO THE EDITOR:

I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight as to the current practice of the Flatbush Women's Davening Group. We are a halakhic *davening* group. Thus we do not say *kaddish*, *kedusha*, or any other *tefillot* that require a *minyan*.

In a footnote to the article by Aryeh A. and Dov I. Frimer (*Tradition* 32:2, Winter 1998), it was stated that the Flatbush Women's Davening Group recites the Mourner's *kaddish* after the service is over. Though at one time some women did choose to recite the *kaddish* outside the *davening* group perimeters (i.e., after services were completed and people were going home), this practice has ceased. It is important that the Jewish community understand that we are a halakhic group, and do not sanction the recitation of *devarim she-bi-kdusha* without the presence of a *minyan*.

FREDA ROSENFELD

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TO THE EDITOR:

I read the articles on women's prayer groups with a sense of *deja vu*. Some two decades ago I initiated a women's *megilla* reading in Beer Sheva. Today I would not participate in women's *megilla* and Torah readings, nor in women's *Simhat Torah* dancing and similar innovations.

When twenty years ago I wrote to the elderly European-educated chief rabbi of Beer Sheva, asking whether we could read *megilla* for other women, he answered in the affirmative in a few straightforward paragraphs. That may have been one of the last times a rabbi responded to such questions "in a vacuum," for feminism had barely reached the backwaters of the Negev. He seemed to have taken the question at face value; but I see now we had asked the wrong question. We were asking what I term a "first-person," rather than a "third-person" question.

First-person questions are framed in terms of what the questioner wants to do: e.g. "We women want to read *megilla* and read/dance with the Torah. May we?" Instead, the question should have been a

third-person question, “What is the best way halakhically to improve observance of *Purim/Shabbat/Simhat Torah*?” or “What does halakha demand of us in these areas vis-a-vis our stance before the Creator?” But had we phrased the question that way, we would not have gotten the answers we wanted.

Another example of the first-person approach is in the article by Aryeh and Dov Frimer. The unstated question addressed on page 28 is “Since we want to conduct a women’s Torah reading, can you find us a precedent or leniency?” The Frimers suggest that “the . . . quote from R. Messas would seem to indicate that such Torah readings are not completely without precedent.” The precedent they refer to, cited on page 27, is from the writings of R. Joseph Messas (*Nahalat Avot*, 5:2). From the original Hebrew of R. Messas’ *derasha* (it wasn’t a halakhic responsum), it is clear he is homiletically solving the rhetorical problem of why the female precedes the male in the verse “a nation that rises as a lioness and as a lion” (*Numbers* 23:24). R. Messas uses this opportunity for an excursus on the utter devotion of women to their husbands, and employs a hyperbole in his paean in order to underscore their eagerness to rise early and to praise their religious devotion by saying, “I saw in a book that in some places in Spain the . . . women used to rise very early to their synagogue, . . . and take out a sefer Torah . . .” R. Messas does not mention in what book he saw this, or where or when this supposedly took place in Spain. Note also that he does not say they read from the Torah. Did R. Messas think this extravagant flourish would one day be suggested as a precedent for the halakhic acceptability of women’s Torah readings (termed by the Frimers a pseudo-*keriat haTorah*)? Not likely, given the strong disapproval of such activities by his nephew, current Jerusalem chief Rabbi Shalom Messas. The passage about Spain might well have been simply an intentional literary exaggeration, a style R. Joseph Messas employs elsewhere. In a responsum on whether *men* can conduct a pseudo-Torah reading (i.e. from a printed *humash*), he first cites some lenient opinions, and then unconditionally forbids the men to conduct such an ersatz Torah reading. With fire-and-brimstone he rebukes them in a 32-line rhymed poem (!)—another example of his rhetorical flourishes (see his *Mayim Hayyim* 79).

Citing a description of women praying and taking out Torah scrolls somewhere, sometime, somehow in Spain is taking non-halakhic material and pressing it into service for women’s services, in order to answer in the affirmative a first-person question of the genus: “We want to do x, can you find us a precedent?”

There is no doubt that those who are posing these first-person

questions are asking them in all sincerity, as we did back in Beer Sheva twenty years ago. Nevertheless, it doesn't mean they are the right questions.

(MRS.) SHIRA LEIBOWITZ SCHMIDT
Netanya, Israel

TO THE EDITOR:

Thank you for publishing the comprehensive article by Aryeh and Dov Frimer on women's *tefilla groups*. A few comments:

In addition to Miriam leading the women in song at the Red Sea, references to, and possibly another biblical model for, women praying in groups can be found in Targum Onkelos and the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Hizkuni to *Exodus* 38:8. The verse states that the *kiyor*—the laver used by the *Kohanim* in the *Mishkan*—was made from the mirrors of the *tsivot*, the women “who would congregate” at the Tent of Meeting. According to Onkelos, “they would come to pray.” Ibn Ezra notes that, rather than spending time beautifying themselves, these “numerous” women came daily “to pray and to hear the words of the commandments.” Similarly, Hizkuni says that they congregated in groups “to pray and to hear the praises of God from the *Kohanim* and *Levi'im*.”

The Frimers point out several potentially negative “public policy” consequences of encouraging women's prayer groups (p. 38) but do not provide a parallel list of potentially positive consequences. Prayer groups give many women *nahat ruah*; they ease the pain some women feel at permanent exclusion from *minyan*; intensify concentration and *kavanna*; provide an opportunity to sing praise to God, out loud, without fear of objections related to *kol isha*; encourage more serious study of the *tefillot*, Torah portions and *haftarot*; present a halakhically acceptable option for ritually celebrating *bat mitsva*, engagement and other life-cycle events; enhance diversity of practice, within halakhic parameters, of the Jewish community; and consequently strengthen the perception that Orthodox Judaism is sensitive to individual spiritual needs. Rather than “making it easier for marginally halakhic women to rebel” against halakha, these groups can make rebellion more difficult and less likely, because they provide an outlet for the need for more direct participation in group prayer.

As for R. Meir Twersky's contention, in your subsequent issue, that women's prayer groups are antithetical to “*avoda she-ba-lev*”: while the spontaneous outpouring of emotion and personal communication with God are indeed essential elements of prayer, they are not the only

ones. The *tefilla* of the *tsibbur* also involves, for example, leading the congregation in prayer; getting an *aliya*; reading from, lifting, rolling and “dressing” the *sefer Torah*; and participating in *hoshanot* on *Sukkot* and *hakafot* on *Simhat Torah*. Are these men who derive satisfaction from, or even seek out, such activities to be faulted for desiring “active participation and leadership roles”?

Although it is true that public leading of prayer and *leining* can induce self-consciousness and thereby reduce *kavanna*, they can also enhance *kavanna* by forcing one to concentrate on the meaning of familiar, standard texts. The experience and effects of “active participation” vary for different people and even for the same person at different times.

R. Twersky is unfortunately right about the lack of spirituality in prayer and synagogues today. But the length of the standard prayer service is one aspect of the problem; for many individuals, there is simply too much to say in too brief a time to maintain the high level of concentration required for sustained communication with Hashem. Perhaps rabbis and scholars should teach not only the structure and meaning of prayers, but how to pray in a conversational rather than a recitative mode, as well as which prayers one may occasionally omit for the purpose of emphasizing quality rather than quantity.

GITELLE RAPOPORT
Chicago, IL

TO THE EDITOR:

Rabbi M. Twersky’s article in *Tradition* (Spring 1998) attempted to make a case against women’s *tefilla* groups. He presented several *hashkafic* insights of the Rav on the topic of prayer, seemingly with the intention of presenting an “objective” *hashkafic* basis for considering issues relating to *tefilla*.

Isaiah Berlin has pointed out that “the frontiers between fact and interpretation are blurred and shifting, and what is fact from one perspective is interpretation from another.” It seems to me that what R. Twersky is presenting as objective *hashkafic* facts really belong in the realm of interpretation.

R. Twersky cites the Rav’s feeling that formality in prayer is a sign of artificial ceremonialism, rather than internal service of the heart. The Rav asks: “Does a spring which gushes forth from the ground with mighty primordial power need any artificial form to grant it majesty and dignity?”

As powerful as this opinion is, it does not reflect the entire spec-

trum of Jewish spirituality. One could, for example, raise the same concern in criticism of the *avoda* in the *Bet haMikdash*. After all, didn't the *Kohen Gadol* wear special garments? Didn't the choir of Levites sing? Wasn't the ritual governed by precise ceremonial behavior? And wasn't the *Bet haMikdash* itself designed with great beauty and dignity?

And doesn't public prayer—as ordained by our sages—entail a certain degree of “artificiality,” e.g. a quorum of ten men, fixed prayers, set rituals, etc. These do not reflect a spontaneous “gushing spring.” While private prayer exemplifies the spontaneous soulfulness which the Rav praises, public worship necessarily strives for these deep emotions through formal structure of prayer. And the Rav surely endorsed the spiritual power of communal prayer.

While the Rav idealizes the *bet midrash* of the Ba'al Shem Tov as the epitome of awe in prayer, many other truly spiritual people might not find such a venue to be satisfying. While some are elevated by the *shtiebel* framework, many others are spiritually elevated by formal and aesthetically pleasing services of prayer. No one has the right to stand in judgement of the authentic spiritual feelings of others who may prefer to pray in environments different from those which one prefers for him/herself. Throughout many centuries and in many lands, pious Jews have prayed from the depths of their hearts in various synagogue settings—some informal, others formal and many in between these two poles.

R. Twersky states that the Rav opposed elevated platforms from which services are led. And yet, millions of pious Jews throughout the centuries have prayed in synagogues where the reader has led services from an elevated platform. Many of these synagogues were led by revered sages who obviously did not share the Rav's aversion to such platforms and had a different *hashkafic* sense from that expressed by the Rav.

While the Rav's opinions cited by R. Twersky are powerfully expressed, they do not by any means represent an objective *hashkafic* view of prayer. Clearly there is a diversity of *hashkafically* valid approaches.

R. Twersky presents several standard criticisms of women's *tefilla* groups, and assumes that such groups violate the *hashkafa* of Judaism. While surely *hashkafa* is a factor in discussing women's *tefilla* groups, the question must always be raised: Whose *hashkafa*? Is the opinion of R. Twersky the only legitimate statement of genuine Jewish expression?

Certainly, many communities neither need nor want women's *tefilla* groups. While R. Twersky may feel that it is an aberration to view participation in synagogue services as an essential ingredient in prayer, a

great many people are influenced spiritually by their participation or lack thereof. Communal prayer is not merely a forum for worship; it is also, by definition, a communal experience. Otherwise, we could each stay home and pray privately. The fact that we gather for public worship implies value in public prayer. For many reasons, well beyond the scope of this letter, women were, for centuries, basically precluded from participation in the synagogue ritual. In our generation, we find a growing number of Orthodox, halakhically committed women who want a more active role in the rituals of prayer. They are not asking to change the overall structure of the Orthodox synagogue; they are not asking for weekly prayer services to replace regular communal synagogue prayers. For the most part, they are asking for opportunities, on a periodic basis, for women to have the experience of conducting the *tefilla* service from beginning to end, in a halakhically acceptable framework. No women are forced to attend such services; women who find such services uninspiring need not return to them in the future. But for those who do find spiritual satisfaction in women's *tefilla* groups, why should they be deprived of this opportunity if the rabbis of their community provide them with proper guidelines?

We will not know the real value of women's *tefilla* groups for another generation or two. Perhaps they will fade away for lack of interest and support. Or, perhaps they will become stronger and more prevalent throughout the Orthodox community. Responsible Orthodox leadership should recognize legitimate diversity—within halakhic and *hashkafic* bounds—within the Orthodox community. What is really needed is authentic and sincere dialogue among Orthodox Jews—not one-sided condemnations and attempts to de-legitimize.

(RABBI) MARC D. ANGEL
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TO THE EDITOR:

Rabbi Mayer Twersky, in his article "Halakhic Views and Halakhic Decisions: Rav Soloveitchik's *Pesak* Regarding Women's *Tefilla* Groups," equates the Rav's views on women's *tefilla* groups with aspects of ceremonialism in *tefilla* opposed by the Rav in his article "*Tefillatam shel Yehudim*." But if we take this comparison to its logical limits, it is apparent that R. Twersky proves either too much or too little.

If the Rav's view on women's *tefilla* groups was an actual *pesak*, as R. Twersky calls it in the title of his article, then his opposition to synagogues with stained glass windows and "platforms decorated with rugs,

flowers and rabbis trained in linguistic expression and pleasant manners” was likewise a *pesak*. And yet, to my knowledge, no rabbinical group has issued an *issur*, based on the Rav’s position, against those practices opposed by the Rav in “*Tefillatam shel Yehudim*,” similar to the *issur* issued against women’s *tefilla* groups. And surely the hundreds of the Rav’s *talmidim*, “trained in linguistic expression and pleasant manners,” who officiate in Orthodox synagogues, resplendent with stained glass windows, while sitting and standing on a *bima* platform decorated with rugs, would not do so if they believed that the Rav’s opposition to these modes of synagogue behavior and decoration were, in R. Twersky’s words, “categorically wrong and impermissible.” Either both should be banned from our Orthodox community or both should be permitted, while, of course, considering carefully and taking seriously the Rav’s position.

Moreover, R. Twersky’s attempt to place the Rav’s opposition to women’s *tefilla* groups in the halakhic category of *ein ruah hakhamim nohe mi-menu* is more interesting for what it does not say; that is, that even R. Twersky does not claim that the Rav himself employed this halakhic category in connection with his position. Indeed, of the 26 people who had “direct, personal discussions with the Rav . . . on these sensitive topics” and who were interviewed by Aryeh A. and Dov I. Frimer for their seminal halakhic analysis of this issue, “Women’s Prayer Services: Theory and Practice, Part I,” *Tradition* Winter 1998 (see especially fn. 235), not one told them, as confirmed to me, that the Rav utilized “*ein ruah hakhamim*” in explaining his views.

As all know, the Rav chose his words carefully; indeed, R. Twersky, in his moving remembrance of his grandfather, “A Glimpse of the Rav,” *Tradition*, Summer 1996, wrote that “the Rav from his earliest youth was trained to be exceptionally sensitive and disciplined in matters of language . . . [with] every word weighed and measured.” Certainly, if the Rav had wanted to convey that his opposition was a manifestation of the halakhic concept of “*ein ruah*,” he could have easily done so, especially since those who were seeking his advice and direction were knowledgeable in halakha. His silence speaks louder, and more meaningfully, than R. Twersky’s attempt to tell us what the Rav really meant.

Finally, I find it ironic that R. Twersky concludes with a heartfelt prayer that we try to eliminate all idle talk at all times from the synagogue, and create an atmosphere conducive for *kavanna*. By virtue of such habitual compliance, we could condition ourselves to banish from the sacred domain of the synagogue all thoughts of politics, the stock market, sports and the like.

As we unfortunately know too well, this ideal has not been reached, or even approached, in many of our shuls. And yet, one attribute that is present in almost all women's *tefilla* groups is that they take seriously their obligation to meet this idealistic standard; their attention is, using R. Twersky's words, "focused upon the impending encounter with the *Ribbono shel Olam*." While that may not be sufficient, in itself, to make these groups halakhically proper, it is something to which those who issue *issurim* against them should give serious consideration.

JOSEPH KAPLAN
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RABBI TWERSKY RESPONDS:

I thank Ms. Rapoport, Rabbi Angel and Mr. Kaplan for taking the time to read my article and respond.

Ms. Rapoport queries if "men should be faulted for desiring active participation and leadership roles." Undoubtedly the answer is affirmative. Hazal's disapproval of seeking leadership roles is evidenced in the following example. The halakha stipulates that the role of *shaliach tsibbur* may only be assumed in response to an invitation and from a sense of obligation. For this reason Hazal ordained that one must initially demur when requested to serve in that role, thereby professing his inadequacy. Cf. *Berakhot* 34a and Rashi ad. loc., s.v. "*ye-sarev*." (Vide "Torah Perspective on Women's Issues," *Jewish Action* Vol. LVII, fn. 4.)

Nevertheless, Ms. Rapoport's implied equation between the behavior of men who wrongly seek leadership roles and women's *tefilla* groups is certainly mistaken. Personal foibles are wrong and must be rectified; however, the institutionalization of such foibles, as is done in forming women's *tefilla* groups, is egregiously wrong because it seeks to legitimize and perpetuate distortions. Moreover, as explained in my article, the misplaced emphasis on active participation and leadership roles which comprises the *raison d'etre* of women's *tefilla* groups not only distorts the Torah's concept of *tefilla*, but also implies that, God forbid, the halakha discriminates against women and mutes their religious life in denying them leadership roles within *tefilla* which even the *tefilla* groups cannot provide. In addition, the egalitarian impulse for women's *tefilla* groups is also antithetical to Torah. And thus, while it is wrong for men to seek leadership roles, it is simply incorrect to equate their conduct with the formation of women's *tefilla* groups.

Ms. Rapoport advocates such groups by reasoning that "the experience and effects of active participation vary for different people." Nevertheless, halakha obviously does not sanction the distortion of

avoda she-ba-lev and principles of Torah in a misguided attempt to enhance one's *tefilla*. Furthermore, as explained in my article, "subjective experience cannot establish objective truth because often it simply reflects and is pre-determined by one's *a priori* hopes and desires."

Ms. Rapoport is certainly correct in emphasizing quality rather than quantity. Vide *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 1:4. However, "the length of the standard prayer service" is not the problem and accordingly the curtailing of that service is not the solution. Rather, the insufficient time we stintingly devote to *tefilla* must be increased. In other contexts—academic, professional, etc.—we succeed in maintaining a high level of concentration as we strive to attain challenging, ennobling goals. Why should we be so quick to compromise in the realm of *tefilla*?

R. Angel rejects the Rav's "opinion" that contrived ceremonialism and artificiality in *tefila* are antithetical to genuine service of the heart by invoking the *avoda* in the *Bet haMikdash* and the formal requirements of public prayer. I simply do not understand. How can one possibly equate authentic, divinely ordained modes of worship with inauthentic, humanly contrived modes of self-expression?

R. Angel and Mr. Kaplan misunderstood my reasons for quoting from the Rav's essay "*Tefillatam shel Yehudim*." Therein, the Rav critiqued tangential forms of ceremonialism which do not tamper with the *tefilla* service per se. Obviously, these forms of ceremonialism do not compare either in magnitude or number to the serious distortions of *tefilla* and Torah principles created by women's *tefilla* groups. My purpose in quoting the Rav's essay was twofold. Firstly, the Rav's comments graphically illustrate the role of axiological concerns within halakha. Secondly, in presenting or analyzing the Rav's halakhic or philosophical thought, whenever possible I always strive to quote the Rav. The Rav's own formulations are pristinely authentic, incomparably eloquent and preclude revisionism. Since the Rav never expressed his opposition to women's *tefilla* groups in writing, the most faithful method of beginning to explain that opposition was to transpose his comments from "*Tefillatam shel Yehudim*."

R. Angel advances the following argument in favor of women's *tefilla* groups: "The fact that we gather in synagogues for public worship implies value in public prayer." As a simple statement of fact, this is quite true. As an argument in favor of women's *tefilla* groups, it is completely irrelevant. Such groups clearly do not constitute public prayer; that appellation is reserved for the *tefilla* of a halakhically valid quorum.

And accordingly it is self-evident that my presentation of the Rav's opposition to women's *tefilla* groups does not imply any lack of appreciation for the singular importance and unquestioned centrality of public prayer.

R. Angel asks, "Is the opinion of Rabbi Twersky the only legitimate statement of genuine Jewish expression?" He concludes his letter on the following note: "what is really needed is an authentic and sincere dialogue among Orthodox Jews—not one-sided condemnations and attempts to delegitimize." I am profoundly saddened by the angry, accusatory tone adopted by R. Angel. My article simply presents and amplifies Rav Soloveitchik's position on women's groups. It is just unfathomable that Rabbi Angel should vituperatively and distortionally dismiss that position as a one-sided condemnation and gratuitously insinuate that I claim a monopoly on genuine Jewish expression.

Mr. Kaplan's initial criticism focuses on my citation of the Rav's essay "*Tefillatam shel Yehudim*" and has already been addressed in my reply to Rabbi Angel.

Mr. Kaplan also argues that "if the Rav had wanted to convey that his opposition was a manifestation of the halakhic concept of "*ein ruah*" he could have easily done so." Ergo, concludes Mr. Kaplan, "[the Rav's] silence speaks louder . . . than Rabbi Twersky's attempt to tell us what the Rav really meant." Mr. Kaplan's premise misrepresents my explanation of the Rav's nuanced response. I never suggested that the Rav intended to specifically classify women's *tefilla* groups as "*ein ruah*. . . ." I mentioned that category as but one example *inter alia* of unequivocally wrong, impermissible behavior which is nonetheless not labeled *asur*.¹ In fact, I explicitly wrote (p. 18): "The latter [axiological infractions], though categorically wrong and impermissible, are classified as *ein ruah hakhamim nohe mi-menu*, or alternatively without classification unequivocally censured." Moreover, most instances of impermissible behavior (the sources for which I cited in the text, *ibid.* and in fn. 18) are not subsumed under *ein ruah hakhamim nohe mi-menu*, but instead without classification unequivocally censured. So too the Rav adamantly opposed the wrong practice of women's *tefilla* groups without applying the term *ein ruah* etc. And thus Mr. Kaplan's conclusion is entirely erroneous, and inadvertently misrepresents the Rav's position.

It would be fruitful to inquire what criterion Hazal employed in categorizing axiological infractions. Which types of impermissible behavior are classified as *ein ruah* etc., and which are censured or condemned without such characterization? This question merits lengthy

study and careful analysis that exceed the limitations of this response. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable that the term *ein ruah* etc. is not sufficiently forceful and thus was deemed too tepid for severe axiological infractions. Seen in this light the Rav's reticence in using the term *ein ruah* etc. while unequivocally opposing women's *tefilla* groups points to the severity of the axiological infraction.

Mr. Kaplan concludes with the observation that women who participate in the *tefilla* groups are serious and focused. Then he remarks, "While that may not be sufficient in itself to make these groups halakhically proper. . . ." Presumably, Mr. Kaplan's tentative tone was intended for rhetorical effect, albeit at the expense of halakhic precision. Surely it is abundantly clear that silence and seriousness cannot compensate for distortions of *tefilla* and Torah principles.

NOTES

1. Indeed, on one occasion (witnessed and recounted to me by R. Fabian Schonfeld *shlita*, a long-time disciple of the Rav) the Rav himself invoked *ein ruah* precisely in this fashion- i.e., not to specifically classify women's *tefilla* groups as such but rather to illustrate the genus of axiological infractions which subsumes such groups. The Rav's comment was offered in the following context. In response to an inquiry, the Rav expressed his unequivocal opposition to women's *tefilla* groups and noted that the Conservative movement began with such initiatives which are rooted in lack of understanding of halakha. The Rav further amplified his remarks by adding that, technical knowledge notwithstanding, one's understanding remains deficient until and unless he can intuit and comply with *retson hakhamim*. *Inter alia*, in addition to *ein ruah* the Rav cited *Shabbat* 54b. (Cf. *Bet Yitshak* 5757, pp. 214, 225).

THE RAV, FEMINISM AND PUBLIC POLICY

TO THE EDITOR:

Rabbi Moshe Meiselman, in his article "The Rav, Feminism and Public Policy" (*Tradition* Vol. 33 No.1), clearly articulates one perspective on the Rav's approach to many issues, not only feminism. While his credentials as both a close disciple and nephew can not be questioned, the sources he quotes are subject to an almost totally different interpretation. R. Meiselman's analysis assumes that the Rav's classic essay "*Ish haHalakha*" is self-descriptive and ignores such articles as "The Lonely Man of Faith," even though the Rav explicitly calls it "a tale of a per-

sonal dilemma” which introduce other aspects to the Rav’s religious thought.

Based on this model for interpreting the Rav, R. Meiselman then states: “Religious activities that did not fit within a halakhic framework, while often not prohibited, were religiously meaningless.” Then he concludes that the secular Jewish government in Israel that does not fit into any halakhic categories is religiously irrelevant, equating the Rav’s personal position with the one that the Rav ascribes to his uncle in his eulogy “*Ma Dodekh miDod.*” The decision of the Rav to go against his family traditions and join Mizrachi is relegated to pragmatic considerations of no intrinsic value. This is not how I read either “*Kol Dodi Dofek*” or “*Hamesh Derashot.*” That which caused the Rav endless criticism and estrangement from both family and other *rashei yeshiva* has become incidental. The references to a covenant of joint destiny and the covenant of the fathers are reduced to rhetoric.

Even accepting R. Meiselman’s framework, one can deny this equation of such functionally differing positions. In that very eulogy the Rav posits an alternate view to that of his uncle, one that denies the possibility that halakha—which deals with all aspects of life—can find the government of Israel irrelevant. This “alternate view” reflects his own approach. The fact that the Rav’s religious Zionism is non-Messianic and far from that of Rav Kook and his followers is well known, but it is not unique. The founder of Mizrachi, Rav Reines, had a similar perspective.

R. Meiselman accurately captures the Rav’s opposition to innovation in prayer and to creating ceremonies. Nevertheless the Rav’s attitude about saying *hallel* on *Yom haAtsma’ut* was more complex. The *minyan* at Maimonides, which follows the halakhic rulings of the Rav, said *hallel* when I started teaching there in 1965 and continues to do so today. At Yeshiva, based on what the Rav told them, his pupils introduced saying *hallel* at the end of the prayers after saying the full *kaddish*. The incident that so upset the Rav on Israeli Independence Day 1978 was when he was asked whether to say a *berakha* on *hallel* and he replied no. When apparently, because of a miscommunication, they ignored his ruling, he left. Returning for the Torah reading, he discovered that they were reading a special *haftara* from a *klaf* and then became incensed.

However, he then generalizes from that opposition to make judgments about the Rav’s attitude to the state of Israel and to feminism. The Rav’s approach to women’s role in Jewish life and in general society is expressed by his approach to their Jewish and secular education as well as his attitude about women’s prayer groups. The intensity of his

opposition as described by R. Meiselman, and his seeing the women's prayer groups as "laying the groundwork for a new and perhaps more pernicious version of Conservative Judaism," neither was expressed publicly nor recalled by others. The argument based on the size and structure of the *mehitsa* in the synagogue at the Maimonides School is faulty because the description of that *mehitsa* is not correct.

The fact that the Rav was a gentleman in all his dealings and did not force his views on others, is reflective of his values and not unrelated to his true views. He did not see halakha as reflecting a single truth and referred to halakha as having a multi-valued logic. The fact that he kept many of his family's *humrot* is not proof of some maximalist position that he was withholding for strategic reasons. In areas where there was no such tradition and his own position was to be lenient, he followed his *pesak* in his personal life.

The last section of the article is completely incomprehensible. The fact that the Rav was disappointed with some of the leaders in the black community does not negate his early sympathy with the civil rights movement. To deny his concern with universal moral and social issues is to claim that the Rav did not mean what he wrote in many articles about the Jews' dual role in the world. The Rav was reluctant to interfere with internal affairs of the government of Israel. Yet he demanded that the Begin government open an inquiry about accusations of Israeli negligence which permitted the massacre of Palestinians by other Arabs at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps. In general, the argument that anyone never heard the Rav speak about something may explain more about their particular relationship than it describes his concerns. When comparing my conversations with the Rav with those of others who were at least as close with him, I noticed that he invariably responded to our interests and did not necessarily reveal his.

(RABBI) YOSEF BLAU
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TO THE EDITOR:

Rabbi Moshe Meiselman, in his highly charged response to Rabbis Aryeh and Dov Frimer's essay on women's *tefilla* groups, makes a number of far-reaching assertions as to the Rav *zt"l*'s attitude towards the state of Israel and religious Zionism. R. Meiselman contends that the Rav saw the state in purely "pragmatic terms" and viewed it as "religiously irrelevant." Moreover, he states that the Rav was at one with his illustrious uncle, R. Yitzchak Zev (Velvele) Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, the Brisker Rav, in this line of thinking. These contentions are inaccurate and

incomplete at best, and ultimately present a misleading and distorted view of the Rav's *hashkafat olam*. Any cursory reading of the totality of the Rav's writings, as well as recollections of his unpublished comments, private and public, and his communal activities in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's (the Rav served as honorary head of the World Mizrachi Organization from the early 1950's till his death in 1993) make R. Meiselman's presentation simply untenable. Let me cite a few examples:

1. In his classic essay on religious Zionism, *Kol Dodi Dofek (Divrei Hagut veHa'arakha*, pp. 9-55), the Rav posits the existence of two covenants, the covenant of fate and shared history, rooted in the experience of the Exodus, and the covenant of faith, of shared values, rooted in the revelation at Sinai. For the Rav, support and involvement with the fledgling state of Israel was mandated by and expressed the noble ideal of the covenant of fate. This covenant, shared by religious and irreligious Jews alike, obligates our involvement and participation in this monumental event in Jewish history. For the Rav, identification with the state is rooted in the command of our matriarch, Ruth, who directs us with the words, "*Ameikh ami*." In the center-piece of that essay, the Rav forcefully argues that the creation of the state of Israel, rising out of the ashes of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, is close to a "supernatural event" (p. 24) in which God, the loving partner of the Jewish people, has "knocked" on our door in various fashions. God, in an act of Divine Providence, brought about the salvation of the Jewish people and the rise of the state of Israel. The establishment of the state heralds numerous significant religious messages that we as Jews must be alert to. The restoration of Jewish sovereignty and Jewish control of immigration, the fact that Jews can now defend themselves against those who attempt to harm them, the undermining of the ancient Christian theology of the "wandering Jew" destined to suffer a nomadic existence, and the renewed Jewish pride that has saved thousands from assimilation and oblivion, are all the work of the divine hand in history (pp. 23-29). In a similar vein, in his classic *derasha*, "Avraham *haIvri*," printed in "*Hamesh Derashot*," the Rav writes: "Let us simply state it: The Holy One Blessed be He created the state of Israel" (p. 75), and in a previous *derasha* he speaks of the establishment of the state as "a divine miracle" (pg. 23). For the Rav, all the elements that came together in the establishment of the state were manifestations of "*hashgaha*," Divine Providence, to the point that he even suggested: "If he [President Roosevelt] had been president in 1948, Israel would probably not have come into being, so mesmerized were we by our faith in him. The *hashgaha* chose Harry Truman to be the instrument of God's purpose."

(*Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 1, p. 69). Would all this be accurately described as “religiously irrelevant”?

2. While it is true that the Rav was far from a messianic religious Zionist in the Rav Kook sense, nor in its more extreme mutation in the stream of Gush Emunim, he clearly did not view the events unfolding before his eyes as “religiously irrelevant.” In truth, he was much closer to the classic religious Zionism of thinkers such as Rav Reines *zt”l* and Rav Gold *zt”l*. Following the lead of Ramban in *Sefer haMitsvot*, the Rav saw the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and the growth of a vibrant Jewish state as the ultimate fulfillment of the *mitsva* of *yishuv* and *kibbush Erets Yisrael*. In *Hamesh Derashot* he writes with pride of the contribution of Mizrachi: “[Our movement’s] great merit does not lie in its demand that the individual go on aliyah, but in its redefinition and restatement of the *mitsva* of settling the Land of Israel. . . We have, simply put, redeemed this *mitsva*, in the ideological, philosophical sense . . . we were the first to explain that the establishment of the state has halakhic significance since by its means we shall be able to fulfill the *mitsva* of possessing and settling it. We said, this *mitsva* is fulfilled not only by building up the country economically, but also by our sovereignty there. The existence of the state of Israel and the fact that Jews and not Englishmen determine aliyah; that Jews and not Arabs are the political masters in the country; and that a Jewish government, police force and army exist is the greatest possible fulfillment of the *mitsva* of settling in the Land of Israel . . . Nahmanides long ago formulated the truth that political sovereignty in the Land of Israel is the fundamental criterion of possession (*yerusha*) and habitation (*yeshiva*) . . . Our movement understood that and welcomed the state’s existence as a fundamental religious value within our scale of values . . . Our movement, alone explicitly and clearly expressed its support of the state of Israel and gave it the imprimatur of the halakha” (p. 89). Later on that page, the Rav writes eloquently of his feelings towards the Israeli flag: “If you ask me, how I, a talmudic Jew look upon the flag of the state of Israel, and has it any halakhic value? I would answer simply. I do not hold at all with the magical attraction of a flag or of similar symbolic ceremonies . . . Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of a passage in the *Shulhan Arukh* to the effect that “A Jew who is murdered by gentiles is buried in his clothes so that his blood may be seen and avenged . . . In other words, the clothes of a Jew acquire a certain sanctity when stained with blood of martyrdom. How much more so is this so of the blue and white flag, which has been stained with the blood of thousands of young Jews who fell in the War of Independence defending the country

