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 tsovot, 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 mitzva, 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 RAPPORT
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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 Kohan Gadol wear special garments? Didn’t the choir of Levites sing? Wasn’t the ritual governed by precise ceremonal 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. Tversky the only legitimate statement of genuine Jewish expression?

Certainly, many communities neither need nor want women’s tefilla groups. While R. Tversky 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 is-
sued 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 posi-
tion.

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 ha-
lakhic category in connection with his position. Indeed, of the 26 peo-
ple who had “direct, personal discussions with the Rav . . . on these
sensitive topics” and who were interviewed by Aryeh A. and Dov I.
Primer for their seminal halakhic analysis of this issue, “Women’s Prayer
Services: Theory and Practice, Part I,” Tradition Winter 1998 (see es-
pecially 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 manifesta-
tion 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 mean-
ingfully, 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 syna-
gogue, 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 shaliah 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, Orah 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 halakic 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. 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 halakic framework, while often not prohibited, were religiously meaningless.” Then he concludes that the secular Jewish government in Israel that does not fit into any halakic 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 Tom 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 as least as close with him, I noticed that he invariably responded to our interests and did not necessarily reveal his.

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’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 *Ha-mesh 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 haMitzvot, 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.
and the populace (religious and irreligious alike; for the enemy made no distinctions). It has a spark of sanctity that is rooted in devotion and self-sacrifice. We are all enjoined to honor the flag and treat it with respect.” Could R. Velvele have ever uttered, much less have written, such a sentence?

3. A constant refrain of the Rav, throughout his derashot and public lectures, was his belief and insistence that Judaism and halakha can, and ought to function and be vibrant, in any historical and social era and ambience. The Rav insisted that our religious duty was to be involved and engaged in the world following the mandate of Genesis, “Vehivshuha,” as well as that of Joshua and Caleb, “Alo na’ale ki yakhel nukhal lakh,” as he formulated it in his celebrated 1970 address on his intense identification with the goals of Yeshiva University. On more than one occasion, the Rav referred to this core belief as “the 14th Ani Ma’amin that a Jew must accept and believe in with a perfect faith.” This too was an essential part of the Rav’s understanding of the significance of the state of Israel, as is noted by Rabbi Hershel Schachter in Nefesh haRav: “According to our master’s z”l (the Rav’s) understanding, the ideology of Mizrachi consisted of two important points: 1) The establishment of the state was a beautiful gift from heaven, and an extremely positive and significant event in the history of our people 2) The purpose of man is not to run away from the life in this world, but rather to enter into the world of science, physics, chemistry, mathematics etc, and still remain a scholar and punctilious observer of the mitzpot, in such a way that he will succeed in sanctifying through his thoughts and deeds the secular world” (p. 85). For the Rav, the return to the Land of Israel and the ability to develop a thriving Torah society in the context of the modern nation-state were momentous opportunities to see the application of halakha and its values on the national-collective stage.

4. R. Meiselman contends that the Rav concurred entirely with his uncle, R. Velvele’s, attitude towards the state as “religiously irrelevant,” as a secular Jewish state fits no classic halakhic paradigm. This contention seems to be part of a whole cloth running through the essay; namely, the Rav was no different from his father, his uncle or his grandfather. It is beyond the scope of this letter to deal with that entire issue, but suffice it to say that the Rav who wrote Ish haHalakha also authored the “Lonely Man of Faith,” “U-Vikashtem Misham,” and countless other essays and derashot that belie any simplistic, monochromatic presentation of his worldview. The Rav was not simply an exact replica of his illustrious forefathers, whose only nuance was that he chose to use modern idioms and
wear western style suits! Moreover, turning to the issue of the place of
the state in the halakic framework, specifically, it seems almost certain
from the Rav’s *very own words* in the eulogy for his uncle that he did not
share the view which he ascribes to R. Velvele! Let me explain.

In the section immediately after the Rav presents the thesis of his
uncle’s attitude to the state of Israel as “religiously irrelevant,” he waxes
elloquent adding the following significant lines: “Indeed *there are others*
who say that the halakha which encompasses all and reaches into every
corner, which is interested in every jot and tittle of the created world,
from the blooming tree in a man’s courtyard to the satellite orbiting
the globe of the earth, from the secret emotional tempests to the far
reaches of the constellations, from the most intimate issues concerning
husband and wife, to the majesty of humanity as a whole, does not
retract itself from the event [of the establishment of the state], even if
that event rejects and rebels against it [the halakha]. The halakha is
aggressive and full of heroism . . . The halakha does not waver, nor does
it give up hope . . . for the halakha’s heroism and strength is rooted in
the depths of the soul which are determined by the truth of the words
of our sages “*Sof Yisrael la-asot teshuvah*—in the end of time [we are
guaranteed] that the Jewish people will repent” and that the Divine
Providence will not abandon the soul of the nation.” Who are these
mysterious “others” whom the Rav specifically chose to juxtapose as a
counter to his uncle? Is it not clear from the language and the concepts
that it is none other than the Rav himself? The language that speaks of
the halakha reaching into every corner of existence, concerned with the
macro and the micro—is this not the language that jumps off every
page of “*Ish haHalakha*”? The presentation of the halakha and its prac-
titioners as “heroic”—was this not the leitmotif of countless *derashot,*
*shiurim* and published writings of the Rav for close to 50 years? (See for
example the Rav’s magisterial essay “Catharsis” in *Tradition,* Spring
1978, pp. 38-54). Finally, what should we make of the Rav’s inclusion
of the Talmud’s and Rambam’s assertion that “*Sof Yisrael la-asot teshu-
va*”—was this not a cornerstone of the Rav’s thinking, so much so that
in one *teshuvah derasha* he devoted an entire section to a development of
this theme (see *Al haTeshuva* pp. 93-99)? Every word in this section
echoes fundamental beliefs that the Rav maintained and promulgated.

Finally, a troubling thought comes to mind. The inaccuracy and
incompleteness of R. Meiselman’s formulations regarding such a central
area of the Rav’s *hashkafat olam* raises alarm bells regarding the rest of
his essay as well. If R. Meiselman could so misread a critical slice of the
Rav’s worldview, in an area where we have so much of the Rav’s own
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clear-cut published writings, oral presentations and ma'ase rav, what are we to make of his contentions in the other areas he addressed in the essay, areas in which the Rav was far more opaque in his public and private comments?

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TO THE EDITOR:

Tradition has long served a unique role in the dissemination of the Torah of R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l (the Rav), first as a vehicle for his own writings and more recently as a forum for analysis and evaluation of his life and work. However, R. Moshe Meiselman's article, "The Rav, Feminism and Public Policy: An Insider’s Overview" (Tradition 33:1) represents a substantial departure from earlier studies on the Rav that have appeared in the journal. First, as the subtitle indicates, the article purports to present a perspective available only to a person with special access to the Rav. Second, aspects of R. Meiselman’s portrait seem directly at odds with the Rav’s own statements, as well as those of his immediate family. This divergence is especially evident in R. Meiselman's discussion of the Rav’s attitude toward the State of Israel and tefilla be-tsibbur (communal prayer). In a striking passage, R. Meiselman attributes to the Rav the same view of the State of Israel as that held by his uncle, R. Yitshak Ze'ev Soloveitchik (the Brisker Rav): "[W]hereas a secular Jewish government in Israel does not fit into any halakhic categories, it is religiously irrelevant." According to R. Meiselman, the Rav expressed this view in his essay, “Kol Dodi Dofek (My Beloved Knocks),” which states clearly that the importance of the State of Israel has to be evaluated in exclusively pragmatic terms. In a footnote, R. Meiselman adds that this essay rejects the religious Zionist principle that there is intrinsic religious meaning to the establishment of the Israeli government.

Yet, the average reader of the essay is likely to have a very different impression of the Rav’s attitude toward the establishment of the Jewish State. “Kol Dodi Dofek,” based on a lecture delivered at Yeshiva University on Israel Independence Day, 1957, describes the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel (in an image borrowed from Shir haShirim) as God knocking on the door of the Jewish people. In a somewhat florid passage, the Rav wrote: “The Lord Who conceals Himself in a beautiful hiding-place appeared suddenly and began to knock at the entrance of the tent of His sorrowful and mournful love . . . . Out of the knocking and beating at the door of His love shrouded in mourn-
ing was born the State of Israel!” (BeSod haYahid ve-haYahad [Jeru-
salem, 1976], 354).

While R. Meiselman describes the Rav’s attitude as coextensive
with that of his uncle, the Rav seemed to have a different view. In an
address to the 1962 Mizrachi convention, the Rav stated: “I was not
born into a Zionist household. My parent’s ancestors, my father’s house,
my teachers and colleagues were far from the Mizrachi religious Zion-
ists” (Five Addresses [Jerusalem, 1983], p. 34). Yet, the Rav explained,
with emotion and pain, that he chose to identify with Mizrachi “against
my family tradition” (ibid., p. 36).

According to R. Meiselman, the Rav viewed “the value of the
State of Israel in purely pragmatic religious terms.” He claims this
theme is “constant” in the Rav’s essays on Zionism. This pragmatic
evaluation supposedly reflects the Rav’s belief that the Jewish State is
“without halakhic meaning [and therefore] has no intrinsic value.”

In fact, the Rav repeatedly affirmed that the establishment of the
State of Israel was an act of God and enjoyed halakhic significance. In an
address to the 1964 Mizrachi convention, the Rav declared, “Let us put
it simply: God created the State of Israel; can flesh and blood be so
brazen as to oppose it? (ibid., p. 116). In the following year’s address he
contrasted the position of Mizrachi with “other religious movements” as
follows: “Only our movement expressed itself unequivocally for the State
of Israel and granted it halakhic status—(ibid., p. 138). In the same
address he proclaimed, “We recognize that the State of Israel is an instru-
ment in the hands of God for the dual sekhira, the one, the covenant of
Abraham, the other, the ancestral covenant at Sinai” (ibid., p. 152).

Of course, the Rav fiercely criticized the anti-religious policies of
the secular Israeli governments. He spoke openly of a kulturkampf in
Israel and the absolute primacy of Torah over secular Zionism. R.
Meiselman may interpret such statements as demonstrating the Rav’s
pragmatic approach to the State of Israel. But the Rav made clear that
his critical stance toward specific governments or policies never under-
mined his view of the Jewish State as a Divine creation with objective
halakhic significance. In a 1960 essay entitled “Al Abavat haTorah
uGeulat Nevesh haDor (On Love of Torah and Redemption of the Soul
of the Generation),” the Rav wrote:

I always distinguish between the government of the State of Israel
and the State of Israel. The State belongs to the entire nation, given to
it by the Holy One blessed be He in His many kindnesses. There is a
complete identity of the Land in its sanctity with the State. The mitzva
of inheriting and settling [the Land of Israel] is expressed not only
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through actual development of the land (admat) of Israel—building homes, planting forests and gardens, populating the land—but also through political conquest and acquisition of the land by Jews. The basic fact that Jewish political sovereignty exists and Jews govern the land . . . constitutes the realization of the essential aspect of the mitzva of inheriting and settling (BeSod haYahid ve-haYahad, pp. 424-25).

R. Meiselman, in his discussion of the Rav’s attitude toward women’s prayer groups, explains that the Rav’s opposition was rooted in halakha, which characterizes prayer without a minyan as a “second-class level of performance,” even for women. Worse, R. Meiselman says, the gemara (Berakhot 8a) states that God will always listen to the prayer of a minyan, but no such promise extends to one who prays as an individual. This argument, although not presented in his name, was enunciated by R. Moshe Feinstein, who ruled that even a Torah scholar is therefore required to pray with a minyan (Iggerot Moshe Orah Hayyim II [New York, 1963], no. 27). But R. Meiselman goes further, arguing, “One who chooses not to pray with a minyan makes a statement that he or she cares not whether God listens or does not listen to his or her prayer. It goes without saying that such a person has missed the essence of prayer and is obviously not motivated by proper religious intent.”

R. Meiselman presents this as the view of the Rav. Yet, mori ve-rabbi R. Aharon Lichtenstein, the Rav’s son-in-law, makes no mention of this perspective in his comprehensive article on the subject, “Tefilla beMishnat haGrid Soloveitchik zt”l (Prayer in the Teachings of R. Y. D. Soloveitchik zt”l).” To the contrary, R. Lichtenstein relates a seemingly different approach: “For a long time, at least until the end of the 1950’s, the Rav would not hesitate to pray alone in order to make more time available for learning. He found support for this decision in R. Hayyim’s understanding of the Rambam’s approach to the laws of tefilla be-tsibbur” (Shana beShana 5759 [Jerusalem, 1998], pp. 288). Of course, the Rav was choosing to forego prayer with a minyan for the sake of Torah study. Moreover, R. Lichtenstein explained in a public lecture that, in his later years, the Rav changed his practice and made every effort to ensure that he participated in tefilla be-tsibbur.

Nevertheless, it seems difficult to believe that the Rav ever would have chosen to pray alone if he felt that such prayer misses the “essence” of tefilla and “obviously” reflects improper motivation. Moreover, even allowing for a certain evolution in the Rav’s views, it seems remarkable that the Rav defined the essence of prayer in terms of whether God listens, but never mentioned this idea in his extensive writings on tefilla. In a series of articles, starting with “The Lonely Man
of Faith” (Tradition 7:2 [Summer 1965], p. 34 et seq.) and continuing through “Ra’ayonot al haTefilla (Thoughts on Prayer)” (HaDarom 47 [Tishrei 5939], pp. 84-106), the Rav set down his views on prayer. Many themes recur: the dialectical nature of prayer, man’s existential need to address his religious longings to God, the relationship of prayer to sacrifice. Yet, nowhere in these essays did the Rav focus on the centrality of communal prayer or the importance of being heard by God. In both “The Lonely Man of Faith” and “The Community” (Tradition 17:2 [Spring 1978], p. 19), the Rav emphasized that prayer must be formulated in the plural, reflecting concern and sympathy for the suffering of others. Thus, the tsibbur must be included in one’s prayers, in order that tefilla represent more than a person’s narrow egoistic concerns. Tellingly, however, the Rav did not pursue this idea to the point of extolling, let alone mandating, communal prayer.

Of course, no one would suggest that the Rav’s philosophical writings reflect the entirety of his views. In particular, the issue of tefilla be-tsibbur was, for the Rav, a topic for halakhic analysis as much as philosophical discussion. In fact, in one of his yahrtseit shiurim, the Rav spoke at length about the halakhic differences between solitary and communal prayer. He developed the idea that a minyan represents the entire congregation of Israel in microcosm; moreover, the communal prayer of each tsibbur is joined into a single unity that God receives as the equivalent of the congregational sacrifices. This analysis seems to demonstrate dramatically the fundamental superiority of communal over solitary prayer as received by God. Yet, the Rav did not draw this conclusion. Instead, he stated:

*Kelal Yisrael* joins in the prayers of ten Jews because, according to the law, they represent the congregation of Israel; but such [collective] participation does not exist with respect to solitary prayer (tefilla be-yehidut). However, this distinction does not affect the reception and acceptance of prayer. Even that of the individual joins in that of the many, and like a sacrifice it ascends together with all of the prayers of Israel, and the Holy One blessed be He accepts it as part of the great prayer of *Kelal Yisrael* (Shiurim leZekher Abba Mori z”l II [Jerusalem, 1985], p. 31).

How does solitary prayer join with communal prayer? By way of explanation, the Rav cited a statement of Rambam’s that seems to contradict his premise: “Communal prayer is always heard. . . . Therefore, a person has to include himself (le-shatef atsmo) in the Tsfibur” (Hil.
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Tefilla 8:1). This rule appears to require one to participate in communal prayer. But the Rav interpreted this to mean that an individual must intend that his individual prayer join with the prayer of the tsibbur. According to the Rav, this is accomplished when the praying individual directs his heart toward the Temple, whereupon “the solitary prayer is accepted with affinity and love amidst the other prayers, even though it was not conducted within a tsibbur” (ibid., 32). Thus, the Rav described a halakhic mechanism by which the solitary prayer of an individual achieves the same Divine reception as communal prayer. (Of course, one could argue that the Rav was discussing an individual who is unable to participate in communal prayer; but it is not clear why the Rav’s theory of inclusion through intention would not apply to one who chose willingly to engage in solitary prayer.) As I understand it, this analysis seems directly contrary to the view attributed to the Rav by R. Meiselman.

Unlike R. Meiselman, I cannot claim the privilege of membership in the Rav’s extended family. Nor, like R. Lichtenstein, was I a member of his household. But I find it difficult to reconcile the Rav’s public statements spanning some twenty years with his positions as R. Meiselman understands and presents them.

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RABBI MEISELMAN RESPONDS:

One of the problems that I suffered during my youth, growing up in the proximity of the Rav as I did, was that I did not realize his unique greatness until much later. Only after being exposed to a wider world, later in life, did I begin to appreciate that he was a had be-doro in his understanding of Torah, both in terms of brilliant insight and in the depth of his understanding. As the years go on, I realize that this was true also of his understanding of the world, especially the community that he chose to serve. The above three letters brought this home. As I mentioned in my article, my view of the Rav is based on having attended countless lectures and shiurim, having read, reread and studied all of his written work, and a deep and close personal relationship with him. All of the above melded into a unified view of the man and his work. Nothing that I wrote is “at odds with the Rav’s own statements, as well as those of his immediate family,” as stated in the above letter.

The comments on my article reminded me of a story that occurred when I was writing my book on women. The editor of the book had written to me that according to the Rav’s reasoning, women’s hakafot with sifrei Torah were permissible in the social halls of syna-
gogues. Since the Rav had based his prohibition on synagogue etiquette, there seemed to be no limitation on social hall activity. I showed the letter to the Rav. He explained to me that this represented a serious misunderstanding of his position as detailed in my article. I then asked him whether he wanted to clarify his position. He said that it is impossible to clarify anything in such a way that his words would not be twisted by people with alternative agendas. I then added that perhaps we should add a quote about social halls, and he told me, "Loz op, Mayshe," i.e., "let us be satisfied with this."

I received an oral critique of my article by someone to whom I repeated this story over twenty years ago. What apparently stuck in his mind was the Yiddish expression that I cited in the Rav’s name. He then communicated to me that I had changed positions over the years. This was especially important, since this rabbi’s synagogue has hakafot with sifrei Torah for women in their social hall. Yes, it is impossible to clarify a position so that one’s words cannot be twisted by people with alternative agendas. This is true also of the above three letters.

When I submitted my article to Tradition, the editor commented to me that I should add some explanation as to the Rav’s view on Zionism; otherwise, people would say that I was claiming that the Rav was a closet Satmar. One sentence, he said, would suffice. It seems that despite our efforts, some people still seem to have grossly misinterpreted my words. The Rav’s caveats that people will always interpret things in the simplest way possible and then misapply them so that they can then justify their own agenda also applies to my article.

I never contended “that the Rav concurred entirely with his uncle Reb Velvele’s attitude toward the State,” or that “the Rav was at one with his illustrious uncle.” No one could make such a foolish assertion. The Rav welcomed Ben-Gurion to Yeshiva University. The Rav was an active member of Mizrachi. He viewed the State in a positive manner and did not view it as demonic or pragmatically a disaster as many others did. However, my point was that there is a difference between something that has pragmatic value and something that has intrinsic value. Shabbat has a great impact on the lives of all of us. One cannot deny its pragmatic value. However, being a mitzva, it has intrinsic value and hence it is obligatory on all of us even when it has either no impact or even negative impact. All of the adduced quotes from all of the authors do not demonstrate an approach that the Rav may have taken to the State of Israel different from what I described.

Many of the above quotes affirm the fact that the Rav viewed the creation of the State of Israel as an act of Divine Providence. This is
obvious and is precisely the point I made about the difference between the providential and the miraculous. The Rav’s attitude to the providential is best described in the very shiur in which he claimed that reciting hallel on Yom haAtsma‘ut is in the category of meharef u-megadef, because it sees God’s presence in the miraculous but not in the providential. Many of the above quotes say that among the positive results of the State is the enabling of people, such as myself, to fulfill Ramban’s mitva settling the Land of Israel. This is again a pragmatic value.

The Rav described in his writings, quoted by the above letter writers, a theological analysis to explain why it is that we can look positively on a government which has had such an anti-religious policy. All of the above is non-controvertible to the simplest of readers of the Rav’s work. The Rav struggled his whole life with the problem of the relationship between observant Jews and non-observant Jewish society. It was on this issue that he split with his family tradition against Zionism and the other American rashei yeshiva on the issue of the Synagogue Council. His explanation of different types of community was developed to explain his position. However, the Rav never claimed, as many members of the NRP do, that the very existence of a Jewish government there demands our enthusiastic support independent of any positive pragmatic result. The Rav insisted on looking at the record. Others prefer blind obeisance. That is the difference between something with intrinsic value and something with pragmatic value.

My position is not unique. In Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, R. Walter Wurzburger writes (page 10): “The Rav’s approach to the building of a Jewish State was completely devoid of messianic overtones but focused upon the material and spiritual needs of the Jewish people and the obligation to do whatever is in one’s power to ameliorate their conditions.” He uses the same source material as the above authors to reach his conclusion. One finds a similar interpretation in the article by R. Moshe Sokol (p. 130). Pragmatism is not a bad word. Pragmatic value may be very great. But it is just that, and has to be evaluated on that basis.

I never mentioned that the Rav’s attitudes were at odds with all forms of Religious Zionism. I did mention that it is at odds with the most common form of Religious Zionism present here in Israel. Quoting other Zionistic thinkers doesn’t change the fact of what is the most prevalent form of Zionist thinking in Israel.

The Rav was one of the founders of Agudath Israel in the United States in the 1930’s. This corresponded with his feeling that he wanted to identify with a group that had an activist philosophy in building a
broad-based Torah society. He switched allegiance to Mizrachi in the 1940s. In the late 60’s he told me that the reason he did this was because he felt that Mizrachi had a much greater commitment to building a very broad-based Torah society in Israel. He used, in this context, his standard phrase, that was reiterated on the occasion, “They want to bring Torah from the reshet ha-yahid to the reshet ha-rabbim.” This was evident in all of his derashot, when he praised Bnei Akiva and other various Mizrachi institutions. The Rav chose his political affiliation with a mind to his pragmatic agenda rather than with a mind to ideological overlap.

R. Blau will recall that the Rav, he, and I davened together at the Maimonides School. Apparently, as he himself admits at the end of his letter, he never asked the Rav how his directive regarding hallel on Yom haAtsma’ut squared with the Rav’s own practice of not saying hallel, or with the Rav’s shiur on that topic. I did. The answer was totally consistent with everything that I wrote. The Rav was aware that he was leading a community to which all aspects of Zionism were key issues. Any suspicion of deviation would undermine his ability to properly lead that community. He was therefore very circumspect about insisting or even discussing his position. In the words of one of his close talmidim, “He didn’t want people to know what he was doing under the tallit.”

Therefore, he gave the specific directive regarding hallel that is recorded in the words of R. Wurzburger in the above article (p. 11): “. . . his reluctance to authorize the recital of hallel on Yom haAtsma’ut and Yom Yerushalayim. If the chapters of Tehillim which comprised Hallel were to be recited, he recommended saying them some time after Kaddish Titkabel and not immediately following the Shemoneh Esreh as is customary on Yom Tov and Rosh Chodesh.” R. Wurzburger records that the Rav treated hallel as a concession and then in a specific form. An elementary halakhic analysis will inform even the most elementary halakhist that hallel after kaddish titkabel has no halakhic meaning whatsoever. It is not hallel. It is a mere charade, a pledge of allegiance to convince the uninitiated that one’s political views are indeed correct. As Rosh Yeshiva of YULA, I discussed with the Rav what I should do on Yom haAtsma’ut. He thought that I should not undermine my communal work in Los Angeles. We also recited the hallel as above. R. Blau would have done well to look to his last sentence—wherein he writes that Rav responded to his (R. Blau’s) interests, rather than reveal his (the Rav’s) own—to better understand the Rav’s position on hallel and many other topics. That is to say, the Rav responded to people within their own frame of reference. He did not impose his views on others, as I described
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in my article. Therefore someone who approached the Rav from within a
certain perspective cannot judge from the Rav’s response what was the
Rav’s own perspective and view. Fortunately, I approached the Rav with
no private agenda.

I was not present at the shiur on Yom haAtsma’ut 1978. I was liv-
ing in Los Angeles at the time. My version of the story is based on what
I heard from haverim and talmidim. When I met the Rav subsequently
and asked him about the nature of his response, he told me, “Mayshe,
men tor nit shveigen az yener makht hoizek fun die Shulhan Arukh
(Moshe, one may not be silent when someone makes a joke of the Shul-
han Arukh).” However, the facts and content of that shiur speak for
themselves. The phrase “acute halakhic mental retardation” is not mine,
nor could I have coined such a phrase. It is uniquely the Rav’s. The fact
that he used that phrase is undisputed among all those who were pre-
sent that day, together with all else that was said that day. In response to
the Rav’s phrase “acute halakhic mental retardation,” a talmid asked,
“But rebbe, does that make it asur?” The Rav snapped back, “It is asur
because it is stupid. It is stupid because it is asur.” Rabbis Helfgot and
Clark, who know the Rav from the written versions of a few derashot
selected for publication by Mizrachi, can at best develop a one-dimen-
sional view of the Rav’s Zionism. Those of us who heard him continual-
ly have to integrate everything we heard into a complete picture. In the
interests of honesty one has to integrate everything he said on that day
with all of the other statements he made on Zionism, including his
comment on that day that Ramban’s version of the mitsva to settle the
Land of Israel is not mainstream halakha and is not relevant in practice.
This is something that R. Blau, who is aware of that shiur, has not done.

R. Helfgot’s assertion that “the inaccuracy and incompleteness of
R. Meiselman’s formulations regarding such a central area of the Rav’s
hashkafat olam raises alarm bells” comes from a complete misunder-
standing of my assertions and formulations. To oversimplify and over-
state and then reject, as R. Helfgot has done, is nothing but setting up
a straw man to knock him down. Furthermore, I do not believe that R.
Helfgot is evaluating my discussion within my own categories or within
the Rav’s. My understanding of the Rav takes into account the integrat-
ion of all of the Rav’s writings and all of his derashot, together with
hours of private discussion.

R. Blau’s contention that my version of the Rav’s intense opposi-
tion “was neither expressed publicly nor recalled by others” suffers from
a bit of historical amnesia. For all of the reasons discussed in my article,
the Rav did not deliver major public addresses on the issue of feminism.
Furthermore, the Rav’s health began to fail at the time the feminist agenda began to take root. He was not capable of taking public stands at that time. However, besides the conversations between myself and the Rav on the topic, a large number of people who spoke to me at the time and subsequently, and those who contacted me after the publication of my article, all confirmed the nature of the Rav’s concern. The sense of betrayal that he expressed to certain devoted talmidim who occupied pulpits, such as, “They will not be allowed to make their own religion,” confirmed to me that all of my conversations with the Rav coincided with his rulings to those who came to him without alternative agendas. As was pointed out in my article and R. Mayer Twersky’s article, this response was not uniform to everyone. Furthermore, R. Blau’s final comment that the Rav “invariably responded to our interests and did not necessarily reveal his” means that he would not necessarily have discussed his real feelings, even according to R. Blau, with all of those who chose to visit and talk with him.

Eli Clark seems to have missed the point of much of the Rav’s writings and teachings on tefilla. The Rav often taught of all of the changes that tefilla should have on an individual. However, the kiyum she-ba-lev that the Rav talked about was the experience of a petitioner standing as a supplicant in front of one’s Creator. A supplicant’s intent is to be recognized. To make tefilla a totally human-centered activity of self-discovery and self-catharsis is to commit the same error that the Rav discussed when he distinguished between pagan ritual and halakhic ritual. R. Clark’s anthropocentric prayer is totally pagan. In the Rav’s words, quoted by R. Clark in an earlier version of his letter, “Tefillah is the desperate cry of the helpless man in crisis” to God for help. Someone who is drowning doesn’t cry “HELP!” for the mere exercise of crying help. He screams so that someone should answer and help him. Someone who cries help and doesn’t care whether someone listens, really doesn’t understand what he is doing or what is happening.

I was not oblivious, as R. Clark presumed, to the Rav’s earlier decision to forgo tefilla be-tsibbur to make more time available for learning. This was not the Rav’s unique position, as R. Clark presumes. It is the position of many members of our family. The decision-making process of evaluating the contradiction between two activities such as the limud haTorah of a gadol haTorah and the extra level of tefilla implicit in tefilla be-tsibbur is a complex halakhic one. For an extensive treatment of the Rav’s view of Rambam’s approach to the laws of tefilla be-tsibbur, R. Clark is invited to read my book, Jewish Woman in Jewish Law, where the matter is treated at length. What I did say is that when
one chooses between two levels of performance and opts for the lesser one, he is insulting the Torah. This has no relevance to one who chooses between tefilla be-tsibbur and limud haTorah. There the essential question is which is a higher level of Divine service. One does not opt there for a second level of performance.

R. Clark posits the fact that the Rav took no heed of the superiority of tefilla be-tsibbur. Only someone who had no personal contact with the Rav could fantasize that the Rav developed a philosophy of prayer that opposed at least the last thousand years of hilkhot tefilla. At the end, he posits that one can possibly square the Rav's writings with the assumption that he is referring to an individual who cannot pray with a minyan. His distinction is in point of fact relevant, as is evident from the Talmud in Rosh haShana 35a. This talmudic passage is the basis of the Rav's entire interpretation of the above mentioned Rambam's view of tefilla be-tsibbur. I again advise R. Clark to read the entire matter as discussed in my above mentioned book. I finally must suggest that there seems to be an internal contradiction in R. Clark's analysis. If tefilla be-tsibbur is not mandatory, why did the Rav need bitul Torah as his justification for forgoing it in the earlier part of his life?

Any elementary student of intellectual history knows the pitfalls of evaluating a man's work in oblivion to the totality of his intellectual output and his life. Rabbis Helfgot and Clark have the luxury of committing such an error with regard to the Rav. I do not have this luxury.

Space does not allow us to enter into the entire issue of the integration of Ish haHalakha with many of the other essays of the Rav. He viewed them as essentially one. R. Blau's assertion elsewhere and implicitly here that the Rav was describing approaches of people other than himself has no basis in reality. The very theme of The Halakhic Mind reasserts much of what the Rav wrote in Ish haHalakha. U-Vikashtem miSham was originally written as a sequel to Ish haHalakha entitled Ish haElokim. The Rav viewed these as one unit. The reasons for the altered version in the format of U-Vikashtem miSham were technical. However, even in its altered form the Rav told me that he viewed it as a complement to Ish haHalakha, certainly not as a rejection. My sons, who know the Rav by tape only, pointed out to me that in one of the Rav's teshuva derashot he bemoaned the fact that his talmidim lack "religieze gefuhl (religious feeling)." He then proceeded to justify "religieze gefuhl" in halakhic categories. Without that justification, it has no place. This is the quintessential Ish haHalakha. This is the basic thesis of my article. The Rav's thought was an organic unit.
THE SEA CHANGE IN AMERICAN ORTHODOX JUDAISM

To the Editor:

I read with great interest the varied approaches articulated by the distinguished contributors to the symposium on the state of American Orthodoxy that appeared in the Summer 1998 issue of Tradition. What is, however, highly instructive is the absence of any mention of the mamzeirut crisis that is raging among American Jews. Statistics indicate that no more than fifteen percent of Jewish couples who divorce obtain a halakhically valid get. The fact that none of the panelists referred to this disaster in progress is indicative of the Orthodox community’s oblivion to this problem.

We must act now to prevent countless future tragedies. We must do everything in our power to facilitate gittin for Jewish couples who are civilly divorced. The success of Brooklyn’s Kayama organization in this vital area must be duplicated throughout the continent. Otherwise, later generations will rightfully accuse us of having been asleep at the wheel when we had the opportunity to prevent our generation from leaving a legacy of widespread mamzeirut for future generations.

Rabbi Howard Jachter
Dayan
Beth Din of Elizabeth, NJ

To the Editor:

Regarding the questions you posed about the current state of American Orthodoxy (Tradition 32:4): you began with querying whether or not certain prominent rabbis who attended an RCA convention in the 50’s would have been invited and would have attended today. It may be true that in analyzing the significant changes in the Orthodox community, legitimation is reflective of this “sea change.” However, by beginning a symposium with this question, have you not in some way legitimized the concern over legitimation?

The need to be validated by other groups is one that has sapped so much energy in the Orthodox community (and cross-denominationally) that it has diminished from the vitality necessary to meet some of the real challenges of Judaism facing the twenty-first century. Who you speak to and who you don’t has often eclipsed not only the content of the conversation but the need for the conversation at all.

Perhaps instead of worrying if Reb Moshe would have agreed to address an RCA convention we should wonder whether Moshe Rabbeinu would have. Something tells me intuitively that the man who spoke
with God and with Pharaoh, with benei Yisrael before and after the het ha-egel and during each bout of complaint, the eruv rav, and Korah, would have found some room on his schedule to address a group of rabbis. If legitimation were a central concern for him we would probably be still wandering in the desert.

With all of our concern over legitimation and validation, perhaps we have neglected to teach and influence those with whom we disagree. Being seen or heard among those to the left of us has become such an anathema that we have forgotten not only how to talk to them but how to teach them. We are too afraid to get close enough for “kiruv;” it was striking how few respondents stressed the importance of kiruv in uniting the broad Jewish community. Moshe obviously had what we lack; the closeness to God to be confident enough to speak with those who were less Godly than himself. Perhaps had he written the questions, he might have begun with this:

Given the miraculous events of this century (and I know a thing or two about miracles) and the burgeoning of American Orthodoxy, what have we done to inspire others to achieve our spiritual success?

Moshe’s ability to inspire those distant from his characterized his leadership. Perhaps we would be wise to learn from his lesson. Speaking, teaching, and even learning from those we disagree with does not have to diminish or compromise our own religious commitments; ahavat Yisrael does not diminish ahavat Torah, it only enhances it. Fortunately, few of your respondents gave much time to this question which might tell us that however reflective the question may be of today’s Orthodoxy it may not be descriptive of tomorrow’s.

ERICA BROWN
Newton, MA

TO THE EDITOR:

It was with great interest that I read the symposium presented in the Summer 1998 issue. Indeed, many people with varying backgrounds expressed their opinions regarding the change in Orthodoxy over the past sixty years and what they see in the future.

There was, however, one significant group that was without a representative. Ironically, this group was the impetus for the change in Orthodoxy in the first place. I refer to your children. The day schools, yeshivot, and summer programs now in place and open to Orthodox Jewry were made to educate the young and to bring the beauty of
Yiddishkeit to the next generation. How is it that no students, not from YU nor any yeshiva nor any secular university, take part in the symposium? There is a new generation poised to move on to the Orthodox scene; a generation for whom the Six Day War is ancient history, and stories of not being able to keep Shabbat in America are as foreign as not keeping Shabbat during the Spanish Inquisition. This is a generation that experiences twelve years of Jewish education and goes to Israel to learn at least another year. These are the future leaders of Orthodoxy. Certainly they should be heard.

Yaakov Weinstein
Cambridge, MA

A MENTSCH FOR ALL SEASONS

To the Editor:

Permit me to add a comment to that of Dr. Gordon Sack (Tradition 32:3, Spring 1998) in complimenting the essays in the Editor’s Notebook. The editor’s selections about Rabbi Moshe Sherer were lucid and evocative of the person. Rabbi Sherer z”l was indeed the majestic Torah personality limned in the essay. However, it is important to bear the following in mind, especially in view of the fundamentalist froth in which Orthodoxy presently finds itself.

Rabbi Sherer was a politician/statesman in the highest and finest sense of those words. He paid homage to the Caesars who needed the homage while he left no doubt of his utter fealty to Torah and the gedolei haTorah who made the decisions of policy and action for the Agudah. Had Rabbi Sherer gone into business or industry he would have been an outstanding CEO. His ability to learn and assimilate all the information and facts about an issue or person made him a formidable and powerful participant in a debate. His honesty precluded having opinions based on hearsay or wishful thinking.

I always appreciate the editor’s candor and insightful writing. The words about Rabbi Sherer matched the splendor of the person.

(Rabbi) Morton J. Sumner
Monsey, NY