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DESTINY, FREEDOM, AND THE LOGIC OF PETITION

Though a sharp knife is poised at one's neck, he should not gainsay mercy.¹

[Y]ou cannot do some action, unless you have some idea how to set about it. I cannot even try to turn into a frog, because I wouldn't know how to begin.²

I.

A.

The building blocks of Jewish prayer, as represented in the *amidah*, are praise, petition, and thanksgiving. Important as praise and thanksgiving are to the religious individual, the heart of Jewish prayer is petition. Thus to know how to pray is, in large measure, to know how to approach our Creator as petitioners. A healthy prayer life requires a correct appropriation of the petitionary stance. As we are wont to think of our age as one in which the sense of prayer is not healthy, it behooves us to investigate the manner in which we perceive ourselves, or fail to perceive ourselves, as creatures petitioning the Almighty.

Some would allege that modern man has difficulty petitioning God because petition manifests man's awareness of dependence on Him. Modern man feels self-sufficient and powerful. If this is the problem, then the appropriate gateway to petitionary prayer is a better appreciation of the human condition, its fallibility at the physical level, its tragedy at the moral level, the threat of ridiculousness whenever human pretensions go unchecked at either level.

For others, profoundly aware of man's finitude, there is something unbecoming in the idea of petitioning God as a child would beg

father or mother for something he wants. God, one intuitively, is too noble to respond to man's parochial supplications; we debase our sublime contemplation of Him when we make Him the object of our self-interested entreaties. Even when we are assured of God's accessibility, our apprehension of His grandeur may, at moments of high consciousness, extinguish our ability to pray, leaving us able only to acknowledge His praise.³ For this difficulty the antidote would be a firmer sense of God's unforgettable commitment to the world He created and of the importance of finite man in the divinely proclaimed scheme. Moreover the very fact that God does not merely permit us, but commands us, to turn to Him in prayer, particularly concerning our needs, enables the halakhic individual to overcome the potentially silencing burden of genuine awe and so to find his voice in God's Presence.

The two ideas we have just mentioned are clearly essential to petitionary prayer. The experience of dependence on the Creator, and the sense of His closeness and concern, must be continually nourished and deepened. Yet not all of our difficulties with petitionary prayer are precipitated by our deficiencies in these areas. Many of us, I believe, are not without a real awareness of our dependence on God and a lively sense of His concern for us. Amid the vagaries and troubles of life—disasters that shadow our personal or public worlds, destiny-shaping hours of decision, the temptation of sin and the shudder of remorse, the transient everyday pains and perturbations the endurance of which leaves no individual trace in our memories—in all these circumstances we instinctively turn to God in prayer. Intellectually, existentially, we may thus be relatively emancipated from the aforementioned objections. We recognize the need to pray. We are thankful that God is available to us in prayer. We wish to take advantage of the invitation to bring our requests before Him. We seek to do so reciting the text of the *amidah*, the *seliḥot*, and other established, statutory prayers. We continue to do so when we insert our private requests at the appropriate places within the *amidah*.⁴ And on innumerable occasions throughout our days and nights, consciously and unconsciously, our spirits turn to the Creator and call upon Him in spontaneous prayer. Nonetheless we may suffer from a disturbing feeling that something is missing. Like the Oxford philosopher of the epigraph, we are not sure we know how to go about the work of petition.

B.

It would help if we could shed some light on the meaning of petition. Presumably our use of the term petition (*bakkashah*) implies some

analogy between the act of petitioning a human being and the act of requesting something of God. The analogy, however, breaks down spectacularly at two points. First of all, God knows the content of our petitions before we speak. Unlike man, He never needs to be informed of our wants. Second—and more important for our inquiry—God not only knows what we want, He also knows whether we ought to get what we want. If He has ordained that it is best that we *not* get what we want, it is wrong of us to attempt, as it were, to induce a change in His judgment. Besides, if God is immutable, it is not only wrong but foolish to think that anything we do can make Him change His mind.

One could try to get around the second hurdle by asking God to do what He will or by making our requests conditional on God's willing to accede to them. By formulating our requests in such a general way, God's acceptance of our prayers is guaranteed tautologically. At the same time the prayer is safe from any imputation of arrogance: in no fashion do we presume to offer guidance to the Creator. This approach finds its classic expression in the Lord's Prayer ("Thy will be done") and in Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane ("If this cup"). This noble approach to prayer, which seems to save petitionary prayer, in reality undermines its very meaning. As Joseph Heinemann has written: ". . . Jesus' conception . . . constitutes a serious blow to the value of prayer; for if from the very outset the petitioner has already abandoned all hope of his request being granted if it does not conform to the will of God, then why is he praying at all?"⁵ Judaism did not dissolve the paradox: not only do we ask God to provide our needs, but we articulate, often quite specifically, the nature of our needs as we perceive them. Not the conditional "if it be Thy will," but the optative "may it be Thy will" (*yehi ratzon*), qualifies the mood of Jewish prayer.

The questions remain: How can we presume to tell God what His will should be? Ought we not to be revolted by the idea that the omniscient God whose will is perfect can be influenced by eloquent entreaty as an infirm potentate, *le-havdil*, is swayed by the courtier's clever flattery? Man cannot manipulate God's will. What then does petitionary prayer mean to accomplish?

One classical analysis was presented by R. Yosef Albo. Albo's problem is the metaphysical one: If prayer is efficacious, then God is mutable. If man cannot manipulate his Creator, then prayer obviously cannot affect His immutable will. His answer: Through prayer I become a better person. The person I become is worthy of a better judgment than that which God has ordained for my previous, inferior self. My actions do not change God; they change me.⁶

This part of Albo's account handles the immutability problem. It does not, however, explain the distinctive nature of prayer. After all, every religiously significant action that I perform contributes to my becoming a different kind of person. How is prayer different from sitting in the *sukkah* or giving charity? To this question Albo responds⁷ that prayer is more powerful than other *mitzvot* because its effects are universal. If other *mitzvot* can be compared to drugs that alleviate an illness, prayer can be viewed as a panacea. But this doesn't really clarify matters because we are still at a loss to understand how prayer as a meaningful verbal gesture, analogous with the anthropological practice of petition, serves to enhance our standing before God.

Now there is a contemporary view, associated with Professor Y. Leibowitz, that confers upon *tefillah* absolutely no significance beyond fulfillment of a halakhic imperative. If obedience exhausts the meaning of prayer, then were we commanded to mumble incomprehensible gibberish instead of uttering petitions for enlightenment, health, etc., it wouldn't make the slightest difference.⁸ Clearly this conception, even more than that of the founder of Christianity, flies in the face of our experience. For the nature of petitionary prayer is not merely that of emitting prescribed sounds, but the request that God provide for our needs. One can ignore this only by averting our attention from the words we actually recite.

C.

Those words, as we have seen, express our perception of our needs and entreat the Creator for their satisfaction. This clearly differentiates petitionary prayer from other religiously significant human gestures. In praying, as in other *mitzvah*-performances, we affect our relationship with God by changing ourselves, not by changing God. We change ourselves by discussing our needs with Him. "Therefore," writes *maran ha-Rav* Joseph Soloveitchik, "prayer in Judaism, unlike the prayer of classical mysticism, is bound up with human needs, wants, drives and urges, which make man suffer. Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should, or should not, petition God about. . . . In short, through prayer man finds himself. Prayer enlightens man about his needs. It tells man the story of his hidden hopes and expectations. It teaches him how to behold the vision and how to strive in order to realize this vision, when to be satisfied with what one possesses, when to reach out for more. In a word, man finds his need-awareness, himself, in prayer."⁹

R. Soloveitchik's account of petitionary prayer thus offers a resolution to the difficulties we started with. True, God knows the content of our pleas before they rise to our lips. The prayer endeavors, however, not to inform Him of our troubles, as it were, but to formulate them in His Presence. The gesture of prayerful petition affects us by redeeming from nescience our hidden hopes and visions. Praying, we do not manipulate God, nor do we withdraw all desire for the fulfillment of our legitimate needs. We strive to discover, in dialogue with God, through the unique verbal enterprise defined as prayer, what our needs truly are, no more and no less than God's will for us.

II.

This analysis appears to have resolved the problems we raised about the logic of *bakkashah*. We encounter God in order to learn from Him "when to be satisfied with what one possesses, when to reach out for more," as the Rav aptly puts it. If, however, we return to the analogy between petitioning God and requesting something from a human being, we soon note that our provisional solution has opened the door to a new problem. It confronts us with an experiential difficulty that probes even further the work of petitionary prayer.

I ask something of my neighbor, I expect an answer: yes, no, or something in between. I ask something of God. According to the Rav's view, which we have made ours, I am not simply telling God what He ought to do, as it were, but rather reaching out to Him, seeking to transform my relation to Him so as to discover my genuine needs. How do I know His answer? Given that the needs which I present before Him are valid, how do I know when to be satisfied with my present state, when to aspire to more?

No doubt there are situations where God's will can be discerned quite easily. Anticipating the possible offer of a lucrative lecture, I fumble with the doorknob as the telephone rings and rings again. I pray that the caller persist until I can pick up. I grasp the receiver, but the line is dead, the opportunity has passed me by. It is God's will that I not get to the phone on time. By then it is logically meaningless and halakhically forbidden to pray for any outcome other than that which has in fact occurred.¹⁰ But such readily settled situations are not typical of the crises which man brings to God in prayer. Even in the case of the phone call it is not clear whether God does not will that I give this particular lecture, or whether my emphasis on financial advancement is unworthy of my true spiritual destiny, and so forth. Thus it is not clear how the simple act of addressing God by

stating our wants and urges can make good on the promise of prayer—the heightening of man’s relation to God to the point where man is properly guided by Him in the understanding and attainment of his legitimate goals. How can man intensify the work of prayer so that it will indeed achieve success? What do you say to God after you blurt out your petition?

Let me animate the philosophical difficulty with an example. Take a situation well known to us from the Bible and familiar from contemporary life. A woman desires to bear children. She believes that such a desire, and its fulfillment, are both worthy and normal. Yet she remains barren. What attitude is she to take to her situation?

At a practical level, the barren woman can either struggle against her situation or, in some manner, accept it. She may sustain her desire for motherhood and seek to alter the facts of her situation, perhaps by consulting specialized physicians. Or she may do nothing, to all effects abandoning, resigned or resentful, her desire for motherhood. Or she may console herself by pursuing some substitute for motherhood. Once she is in the market for such consolation there will be no lack of wise proposals among which to choose: Since you can’t have kids, why not take a course instead? Why not get a job, or visit people in the hospital?

Now it sometimes happens that the sad day arrives when the fertility experts have thrown up their hands in despair and cleared the stage for the well-meaning social workers and their well-meaning suggestions. The community has judged, rightly or wrongly, that her chances are poor, that she ought to get on with the rest of her life. If she refuses to do so, she will be deemed maladjusted and most likely society’s judgment will be confirmed as her life is increasingly poisoned by her bitter and failed obsession.

But the barren woman’s life need not be subjected entirely to the watchful jurisdiction of the therapeutic specialties. Seated in doctor’s waiting room, interviewed by social worker, pouring tea for the meddlesome neighbor, idle for a moment at her desk or alone in the empty house, the life of the spirit goes on. The pain of misunderstanding and the anxiety of choice become the text of her petitionary prayer.

What is the content of that prayer? What ought she say to God? You say she is to discover God’s will for her. But what is that will? Her desire for motherhood is perfectly legitimate. But God is not obliged to satisfy her longing. If, as apparently is the case, she is to remain barren, she must not defy God’s will for her. The correct response to God’s “No” is reconciliation, not resentment. Having investigated without success all reasonable likelihood of scientific relief, she must make her peace with the life God ordains for her, not

ruin her life spitefully because God declines to give her the life she prefers. But in telling her to resign herself to God's will, are you not advising her to abandon her categorical quest that God respond to her legitimate cry? Is she to speak faithfully before God, or merely to submit stoically to a fate that is useless to challenge because it is beyond her power to change? Are we not demanding of her that she anesthetize her authentic need-awareness? Have we forgotten the Rav's insistence that "the individual who displays indifference to pain and suffering, who meekly reconciles himself to the ugly, disproportionate and unjust in life, is not capable of appreciating beauty and goodness"?¹¹ Is not such passive acquiescence to one's fate the negation of petitionary prayer?

Thus the dilemma persists in full force. Her prayer must maintain her commitment to the satisfaction of her needs as spoken truthfully before God. At the same time the pray-er knows all too well that man is often mistaken about his true needs. To quote the Rav once more: "Adoption of a wrong table of needs is a part of the human tragic destiny."¹² As we have noted, the purpose of prayer is to redeem man, through the tuition of his Creator, from ignorance of his true needs and legitimate goals.

Thus far the discussion has failed to provide us with a formula by the light of which we can determine how man is to determine God's teaching about the satisfaction of man's worthwhile needs. This in itself is not surprising. For we are to discover our correct table of needs by praying, not by reading (or writing) essays about praying. Were it indeed possible for man to work out his existential dilemmas (his table of needs, the attitude he should take toward the fulfillment of his desires, etc.) by some means other than petitionary prayer, it would be much easier to dispel our self-ignorance and dissolve our anxieties. One might, perhaps, pose a halakhic query: "Rabbi, what's a barren woman (under the specified circumstances) to want?" Or, one might submit one's case history to the helping profession of one's choice and dutifully follow the recommendations of current "scientific" opinion. The self-understanding achieved by prayerful dialogue with God cannot, presumably, be gained by any substitute for prayer.

To say this seems to condemn man to an anxious existence in which he occupies, bereft of guidance, a bare stage, upon which he waits, without assurance of response, for the divine enlightenment that alone can enable him to get on with his life. But though man's journey to God is ultimately lonely, traversing mysterious spiritual pathways over which no eye has flickered, it does not take place in an existential vacuum. The praying Jew, struggling to discover some structure within which he can order his self-awareness, is able to

educate himself for the task of prayer by appropriating the models provided by tradition: the intellectual dimension of *tefillah*, integrated with the intellectual gesture of Torah.¹³ Thus the story of prayer as told by the Bible and the Rabbis, and the paradigms of prayer inculcated through the statutory prayers of Halakhah, serve to create the frame of reference for man's lonely approach to God. It is to the Biblical accounts and to the halakhic categories that we shall direct our attention.

III.

A.

At first glance the biblical stories about prayer represent the very features that have aroused difficulty in dealing with petitionary prayer. In *Tenakh*, it seems, God's will is promptly made accessible to those who call upon him. Often the petitioner is so assured of God's favorable response that he offers thanks before the fact, as witness Yehoshafat's prayer and the common transformation of distress to joy in several Psalms.¹⁴ Even when the answer is negative, it is clear and unambiguous. Thus, when God denies Moses' request to enter the Land, there is no doubt about it: "Enough, do not speak to Me again of this matter" (Deuteronomy 3:26). R. Hanina b. Dosa emerges from his prayers on behalf of the sick to predict confidently which will live and which will die.¹⁵ In these cases God acts and speaks so as to clarify the petitioner's situation. The petitioner knows immediately whether his expectations are to be rewarded or forsaken. But the pattern revealed by these examples is hardly applicable to our own experience for which uncertainty about God's response is the norm, where Silence seconds our plea for Heavenly guidance.

Despite this initial impression, however, an examination of Biblical narrative discloses two contrasting prototypes of expectation on the part of praying individuals. One paradigm can be derived from the *avot* (Patriarchs) and *immahot* (Matriarchs); the other stems from the prayer of Hannah.

B.

The Rabbis were puzzled by the chronic barrenness that afflicts the *avot* and *immahot*. Why did God impose this suffering upon them? The best known answer to this question: "God desires the prayers of

the righteous.”¹⁶ Now this should not be understood to mean simply that God wishes to elicit from the *avot* a consciousness of creatureliness and need. Had this been the case they might just as effectively have been propelled to prayer by such theologically undignified causes as an attack of gout or a paroxysm of hay fever: the difference between these complaints and barrenness would merely reflect the degree of suffering. Following our analysis, however, I would submit that the *avot* were specifically required to articulate their dependence upon God and their perception of their needs with respect to bearing children. Prayer so intensifies their God-relationship that they become the individuals whom God’s will ordains to be the parents of their children. The vision, upon which is founded not only their individual hope for happiness in this world but the entire historical and metaphysical enterprise of *Kenesset Yisrael*, is redeemed through their approach before God in petitionary prayer.

Thus it is not accidental that the prayer-inducing crisis that runs through our forefathers’ lives like a hereditary trait pertains to the central theme of their lives: the creation of the people of Israel. But this awareness of the essential role of parenthood in the biographies of the *avot* and the *immahot* reminds us of a remarkable feature of their prayers. They are, in fact, praying not only for the satisfaction of a valid human need or vision, but for the fulfillment of a promise which God has already given.

Note well that the idea of praying for something that has already been promised does not violate the logic of petitionary prayer as expounded above. If petition is defined as addressing to God one’s needs and expectations with the intention of acquiring one’s self before God, then the fact that the achievement is promised does not exempt one from the work of prayer or render it meaningless. Nonetheless it is appropriate to recognize such prayer as a distinct type. Let us name it the “prayer of destiny,” because its focus is the fulfillment of a destiny that is already known, rather than the formulation of a destiny yet to be discovered.

That the prayer of the *avot* is to be understood as the prayer of destiny *par excellence* becomes more evident if we examine in greater detail the text of Genesis. Prayer of destiny means that God has determined what must happen, and the purpose of prayer is primarily to bring about that which has been ordained. Among the *avot*, then, it is Isaac who represents the theme of destiny more than any other, insofar as Isaac was to marry one wife through whom the promise of seed was to be fulfilled. In this light it is not surprising that Isaac and Rebecca are the only pair among our forefathers to be depicted explicitly, within the Biblical text, praying for children.

It did not escape the eye of Rashi that the Torah employs an unusual verb to describe Isaac's prayer—'atr. He states that the root means "to be pressing and abundant."¹⁷ If we wish to give this sense of "pressing, urgent" prayer not only a quantitative meaning but a conceptual one as well, we could do worse than to associate it with the prayer of destiny, which is pressing precisely because it aspires to that which is already promised.¹⁸

Such an interpretation of the uncommon verb 'atr is, I believe, advanced in a startling midrashic image. Phonetically equating 'atr = to pray with *hatar* = to dig, R. Levi illuminated God's response to Isaac's prayer with the following parable: "The king's son was digging in order to take a pound of gold from his father. One excavated from the inside and one from the outside."¹⁹ This remarkable conception captures the experience we have called prayer of destiny. Man tunnels towards God, while "on the inside" (as it were) God the accomplice moves forward to fulfill man's vision.

The distinctive destiny-oriented character of Isaac's prayer is strikingly highlighted by contrasting it with Jacob's response to Rachel's demand for children. Jacob says (Genesis 30:2): "Am I in God's stead, who gainsaid you fruit of the womb!" Rashi, following the Midrash:²⁰ "You say that I must emulate father. Father had no sons; I have sons. God gainsaid you, not me." However we confront the psychological considerations raised by this exchange, Maharal of Prague's question is pertinent: "What of it? Should he not pray for that reason? It appears to be that the generations of the tribes are not like other generations, for God's intention was to extract from this woman, not another woman. Therefore Jacob did not wish to alter the matter. But Isaac knew that all his sons would come from this woman who was his mate; therefore he prayed for her."²¹

Some would object—and to them my allusion to Maharal is like the red flag provoking the proverbial bull—that this notion of an already formulated destiny being fulfilled detracts from the psychological reality of the stories about the *avot*. To this I must reply that the promises to the *avot* are prominently mentioned in the Torah, not least when God speaks to them. Though I have no desire to treat the *avot* as ossified figures in a deterministic tableau, the element of promise and destiny is integral to their self-understanding, and to bracket this dimension misreads them as personalities no less than it misses a major facet of the Torah which tells their story.

Whether this element of destiny is of value to the contemporary consciousness is a different debate. But to consider the relevance of destiny-oriented prayer to the experience of our age, we must first acquaint ourselves with the contrasting model of biblical prayer exemplified by Hannah.

C.

From the distance of three thousand years, the story of Hannah appears to be of the same stuff as that of the *immahot*: a saintly woman whose beginning was hard, whose outcome was magnificent indeed. Entering the barren Hannah's world, however, we taste a very different kind of experience and consequently a different kind of prayer. Hannah has received no promise. She undertakes her crucial prayer without any assurance of a response.

Something of her mood is conveyed by the Rav in an oft-repeated comment about Hannah: Why was Hannah answered that year? Had she never prayed before? Of course she had, but that year was different. Elkana was moved by her travail. He said to her: "Am I not better than ten sons?" And his well-meaning consolation compelled her to the truth: not even her loving husband understood her. Even he imagined a husband's affection could take the place of her desire for motherhood. She goes to the Tabernacle; Eli doesn't understand her either. In her utter loneliness, she prays as she never did before.

In this kind of prayer, the individual not only asks for the fulfillment of her destiny, she ventures to explore the nature of a destiny that is not yet defined. The prayer of destiny is the presentation of man's needs to God with the purpose of intensifying the God-relationship, trusting in the knowledge that successful prayer enables a faithful God to fulfill man's expectation. The prayer of Hannah, by contrast, is the "prayer of freedom," which is to say the prayer of angst.²² It is the presentation of one's perceived needs before God with the purpose of intensifying the God-relationship, trusting that God will illuminate the prayer to a correct self-understanding, without knowing beforehand whether God wills to grant one's petition or to reject it.

For the prayer of destiny the ruling image is that of Isaac the prince burrowing toward the treasure on the outside while God the King completes the tunnel on His side. Quite different, though no less astonishing, is the talmudic parable of Hannah's lonely quest. Again God is the King, "a king of flesh and blood who prepared a feast for his servants. Came a pauper and stood at the portal. He said to them: 'Give me a piece of bread,' and they ignored him. He forced his way and went in to the king. He told him: 'My lord the king, from the whole feast you have prepared, is it difficult in your eyes to give me one slice of bread?'"²³ The feast, it would seem, is arranged for the hosts of heaven and the hosts of earth.²⁴ Hannah is uninvited, misunderstood, ignored. No promises hearten, no kindred voice to encourage. In this seemingly indifferent world, she forces her way

into the King's chamber and asks her Creator: "At this great feast of existence, is there no place for Your servant?"

The Rabbis learn many *halakhot* from Hannah. Hannah, for example, teaches us, as she taught the uncomprehending Eli who thought her drunk, that prayer should not be audible to others.²⁵ Elsewhere, the Talmud teaches that audible prayer is wrong: "He who makes heard his voice in his prayer is one of little faith; he who raises his voice in his prayer is a false prophet." This is because such behavior reflects depraved theological concepts.²⁶ Was Eli theologically obtuse? Did he need to be told, for instance, that God can hear prayer without an ear trumpet?

I believe therefore that Hannah's innovation is distinct from that taught in the other talmudic text. There the objection to audible prayer is that such a practice may signify corrupt theology. This objection is waived by Halakhah when there is some valid reason for the practice (e.g., the pray-er finds it easier to concentrate by pronouncing the words audibly²⁷). Hannah's prayer, however, requires quiet for a different reason: she is giving voice to hopes and to self-perceptions that she cannot share with anyone else. For the prayer of destiny, privacy is not always a necessity. Others may hear what God destines for the individual or for the community without subverting the intimacy of petition for that destiny's realization. But where the destiny is as yet hidden, and God's yes or no obscure, to overhear is to intrude.²⁸

Our study of the biblical narratives has disclosed two models of petitionary prayer, the prayer of destiny and the prayer of freedom. Of these, it would seem that Hannah's anxious prayer is closer to the modern predicament than are those of the *avot*. We next turn to the halakhic categories of obligatory prayer. It is these, after all, which govern our normal statutory prayer life, and it is these which Halakhah has ordained to educate and to refine the religious consciousness which we bring to all acts of prayerful existence, be they spontaneous or routine, conscious or unconscious.

IV.

A.

Let us adumbrate three themes defining the status of halakhic prayer. Our initial exposition will draw upon the work of the Rav:²⁹

1.) Prayer as *siḥah*—dialogue with God. We have already discussed the ideas underlying this category. Derived by Halakhah from the prayers established by the *avot* (*Berakhot* 26a), this

conception finds its prototypical expression in the petitions of the *amidah* culminating in the benediction *shome'a tefillah*—we ask God to hear our voice and respond to our avowal of need and dependence.

2.) The same context also speaks of prayer as *korban*; prayer corresponds to the sacrificial cult. Man grasps his destiny as a commitment of self to the service of God. This theme in the *amidah* is appropriated in the benediction of *retzei*, in which we entreat God to accept our prayer under the aspect of sacrifice.

3.) In addition to the two categories of *tefillah* concerned with man's understanding of his needs and goals, with judging and discrimination, we also, in praying, resort to *ze'akah*—the cry. Here, man expresses the brute fact of his dependence and need. As the Rav points out, even an animal shrieks in pain. Thus *ze'akah* may have significance even before it is addressed to God.³⁰ The classical manifestation of *ze'akah* in our liturgy is *seliḥot*.

Our present task is to correlate the two situations of biblical prayer—destiny and freedom—with the three categories of prayer posited by Halakhah.

The prayer of freedom, as we have defined it, focuses on man's struggle to understand his needs. Clearly the reflective elements in *tefillah* (the first two categories) provide the appropriate avenue for the prayer that seeks to discover its vision. Thus it is not surprising that the Talmud regards Hannah as a source of *halakhot* relating to the *amidah*.³¹ The sacrificial commitment connected to the self-understanding of petitionary prayer is also conspicuous in Hannah's words: she vows to give her son to God "all the days of his life."³² The prayer of destiny, for which destiny is already a given, nonetheless requires the full presentation of needs before God in order to attain the correct relationship with Him. Here too, therefore, the *amidah* is both the appropriate vehicle and the felicitous guide to self-evaluation.

What about *ze'akah*? To the extent that petitionary prayer involves training in the awareness of dependence upon God, *ze'akah* fits the bill. Indeed, the content of *ze'akah*, the moment it gets beyond the sheer reflex of pain, is no more and no less than the expression of helplessness and dependence on a Power outside oneself. The prayer of destiny can thus be pursued through both attitudes. To the degree that one acquires himself by understanding God's will for him, *tefillah* is the appropriate framework; insofar as one enhances the God-relationship by appropriating the experience of dependence on the Creator, *ze'akah* brings one closer to the correct relationship.

This is not the case with respect to the prayer of freedom. The individual whose concern is *exclusively* with the discriminating

aspect of prayer—the *tefillah* which establishes the hierarchy of needs—will not engage in *ze'akah*. In the light of the Rav's judgment that *tefillah* represents a "more advanced awareness" than *ze'akah* one might dismiss the persistence of the latter as a halakhic-religious reality as a concession to human frailty. "Man," comments the Rav, "even the most sophisticated and educated, frequently resembles the baby who cries because of pain, but does not know how to alleviate the pain."

This last comment of the Rav should not be construed to deprecate the gesture of *ze'akah* as a response of weakness. Consider the fact that reciting the thirteen attributes of compassion is halakhically defined as a manifestation of *ze'akah*. This text, revealed to Moses at the moment of his greatest closeness to God, stands at the apex of man's quest to know God. Surely its employment in the liturgy cannot be viewed as nothing more than an admission of man's inability to exist at a more reflective level.³³

To clarify the status of *ze'akah* we must seek a fuller classification of its functions. A discussion of the thirteen attributes will lead us to reconsider the place of the prayer of destiny and the prayer of freedom in our religious experience.

B.

R. Yohanan said: "Were this not an explicit verse it would be impossible to say it. We learn that the Holy One Blessed be He wrapped Himself like a *sheli'ah tzibbur* and showed Moses the order of prayer. He told him: 'Whenever Israel sins, let them do before Me like this prayer and I will forgive them.'" R. Yehuda said: "There is a covenant for the thirteen attributes; they never return empty-handed" (*Rosh Hashanah* 17b). What are we to make of this assurance that the thirteen attributes are "guaranteed" to achieve reconciliation with God?

R. Elimelekh Bar-Shaul³⁴ has elucidated two traditional approaches to the role of the thirteen attributes. At one level they function as a guide to repentance (sinful man committing himself to emulating God's moral attributes). At another level they are a declaration about divine forgiveness. On the first Yom Kippur in the desert, God told the inquiring Moses that nobody can see His Face, but that man could relate himself to God's attributes of action. And God went on to "define" His nature, as it were, through the thirteen attributes of compassion. When Israel sins, let them recall to God, as it were, His self-definition.

Following the second feature of this analysis, the recitation of the thirteen attributes is like the petitionary prayer we discussed

above, insofar as it enhances the relationship between man and God by expressing a significant feature of that relationship. Unlike our previous account of prayer, however, the formulation here stresses not man's search for guidance about his own table of needs, but rather God's commitment to man.

By this stage we note that *ze'akah*, as expressed in the recitation of the thirteen attributes, has clear affinities with the prayer of destiny. Both categories focus on that of which man is assured. In the prayer of the *avot* this assurance was built upon their sense of personal destiny, God's promise to fulfill through them His plan for the human race. So too the recitation of the thirteen attributes brings man closer to God in the knowledge that divine response is, in a sense, rendered inevitable by God's own self-revelation. And this insight is the key to resolving the paradox of *ze'akah*. On the one hand, it includes the expression of raw, inarticulate emotion, and is thus less advanced than *tefillah*. On the other hand, *ze'akah* manifests the proclamation of God's relationship to man and to the world, and thus contributes to its experiential maturation.

Recognition of the affinity between the prayer of destiny and certain aspects of *ze'akah* offers us a deeper perspective on a feature of petitionary prayer briefly touched upon above, namely, the question of sound vs. silence. Hannah's prayer of freedom would be undermined if overheard, which is why the private *amidah* must not be audible to others. But, as we argued, there is another kind of objection to audible prayer, stemming not from the necessity of intimacy with God, but from the tainted theology that may be implicit in such practice. The latter group of objections is overridden halakhically when the purposes of prayer are better served by audibly articulated words.

It is no secret that, except for the private *amidah*, Halakhah permits, and our practice encourages, audible, even resounding performance of statutory prayers. What is the rationale for this? Do we really suspect, at some regressive level, that *has ve-shalom* God cannot hear us unless we holler? The answer is obvious: letting oneself go, whether alone or in community, intensifies one's declaration of dependence upon God. *Ze'akah* as a reflex helps relieve my pain; *ze'akah* as a strategy deepens my experience of God. If it has been observed that the most cold-blooded Jew weeps at *ne'ilah*, this is not unconnected with the fact that, among the descending shadows of the departing day, even the most inhibited of us shouts his appeal with all his strength. In this experience of *seliḥot*, where supplication is followed by recitation of the thirteen attributes, *ze'akah* as the outcry of the baby who cries because of pain, remorse, helplessness,

is indistinguishable from the roaring proclamation of God's commitment to man.

Something of this experience is implicit in a remark of Ramban. Speaking of our obligation to celebrate what God has done for us, he writes: "The purpose of lifting one's voice in prayer and the purpose of synagogues and the merit of public prayer is that human beings have a place to gather and thank God who created them and gave them existence. And they shall promulgate this and say before Him, 'We are your creatures.' This is their meaning in saying: 'And they shall call unto God with force—from here you learn that prayer requires voice . . .'"³⁵ Here Ramban unites under one rubric the prayer of thanksgiving with the sinner's panicky plea for mercy. He does this by stressing not the element of anxious supplication but the declaration of creatureliness which recalls God's concern for His world. This act of proclamation is best accomplished publicly, with lifted voice, unlike the prayer of freedom, which takes place in private.³⁶

Earlier in this discussion it seemed that only the prayer of freedom could serve as a paradigm of modern prayer. The prayer of destiny appeared alien to us, as individuals and as community, for whom the only thing certain is uncertainty about God's will for us. Examining these two types of prayer, and their relation to the three halakhic modes of petition before God, demonstrates that the awareness of destiny—the knowledge of what God has done and promised to do for the world, for man, for Israel, for individuals—is an essential ontological dimension of our ability to exist before God and to address Him in petitionary prayer. Thus freedom and destiny do not exclude one another in the consciousness of the pray-er, but rather encounter one another in a dialectical tension. The human reality before God anxiously looks out to a not-yet-determined future, but is rooted in a rich and determinate communal and individual past. The future is open, but its nature is anticipated in the light of our destiny.

V.

Where have we finally arrived in our reflections on petitionary prayer? At the outset I noted that prayer can flourish only where there is a healthy sense of man's dependence upon God and God's concern for man. While this awareness can be nurtured independent of the act of prayer, we have seen that prayer itself, both *tefillah* and *ze'akah*, trains us in the experience of these realities. In other words, man needs God's help in working out his hierarchy of genuine needs

and in satisfying them; man expresses his need both reflectively and emotionally, and his address to God both presupposes and includes the consciousness of God's availability to him.

How do we discern God's response to our entreaties? After all our analysis, there is still no clear answer external to the experience of prayer itself. Here many of us face a major stumbling block to petitionary prayer: the tenacious conviction that somehow there must be an easier way to decide the meaning of our lives, to induce the Creator to pronounce, so to speak, an unambiguous russet yes and honest kersey no. Why can our table of needs not be determined in an objective manner—for Orthodox Jews the obvious candidate is the rule of Halakhah? Why can our way of achieving those legitimate needs not be determined objectively by some accepted psychological or mechanical technique? If such questions continue to obstruct our prayer, it is largely because we have not yet plumbed the true depths of human dependence, blindness, and vulnerability.

Belief in the possibility of an unambiguous formula for existence is premised on the false thesis that tragic choices are not inevitable, either because one fondly imagines that all legitimate human aspirations are compossible or because one thinks that all conflicts among such aspirations can be resolved conclusively by determining objectively which good ought to be realized.

The illusion that all valid goals can be achieved is an old one. Whether it stems from a theological idealism that refuses to discriminate between the real world and the eschatological vision, from a logical fallacy that assumes the consistency of valid desires to be analogous to the consistency of valid propositions, or from garden-variety wishful thinking, need not detain us here.³⁷ It is sufficient that we recognize the reality and its implications for our lives. Once again, these have been eloquently spelled out by *maran ha-Rav* Soloveitchik: "Man is, quite often, a captive of two enchanting visions, summoning him to move in opposite directions . . . Man must decide which alternative to take . . . The clash is staggering. *Man, confused, kneels in prayer*, petitioning God, who has burdened him with this dialectic, to guide him and to enlighten him. The Halakhah is concerned with this dilemma and tries to help man in such critical moments. The Halakhah, of course, did not discover the synthesis, *since the latter does not exist*. It did, however, find a way to enable man to respond to both calls."³⁸

It is not only the external content of our decisions that we take to God in prayer, but the inward attitude that is our relationship to that decision. In a world of tragic choice, it is tempting to devalue the option that, at a practical level, is rejected. Resignation to one's fate may have more in common with the "sour grapes" syndrome than

with the religious stance of faith. This is because the “knight of resignation,” in choosing to follow the overriding duty, withdraws his commitment from the lesser *telos*. The “knight of faith,” by contrast, retains his full commitment to both legitimate goals, even as he is compelled to choose the active pursuit of one.³⁹

This painful, seemingly absurd, ability to hold fast to two apparently contradictory goals is also the task of prayer. In teaching us what to ask, prayer also teaches us how to hope. Practical man cannot will what is objectively hopeless; he heeds the sage counsel of W.C. Fields: “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again—and then give up. Don’t be a damn fool about it.”⁴⁰ Do something else. Had Hannah returned home without escaping her barrenness, life would go on. There would still be obligations to meet, a loving husband to be grateful for. All these would lay claim on Hannah’s person, and as a religious individual she would be summoned to respond to that claim. Yet all this time, without negating her quotidian commitments one iota, she would have continued to “be a damn fool” and pray for a son. Had God ordained differently, had Abraham lost Isaac, he would still have been a man of faith, believing that God would fulfill the promise of Isaac as firmly as he had believed the command to give him up. Had he devalued Isaac, had he resigned himself to his death, intimates Kierkegaard, he would not have merited getting Isaac back. When Moses failed to gain entry to the Land of Israel, he did not resignedly substitute some other spiritual value for that which was denied him. Instead he marched forward to complete his life’s work, and was granted, before his death, a panoramic vision of the Land to which he had tragically aspired.

The challenge of living in such absurdity is not limited to biblical personalities. The man or woman who must rise from *avelut* to welcome the joy of Yom Tov, *without* diminishing his legitimate sense of grief, the human being who must prepare for the objective prospect of a parent’s or spouse’s death without beginning to treat the loved one as if he were dead already—such individuals are attempting to live by virtue of the absurd.⁴¹ How to live in this way cannot be dictated by external authority, be it religious or secular. Faith, as opposed to resignation, can only be attained when life is not treated as a problem requiring a solution, but as a mystery summoning the individual and the community to an encounter with God. Faith is found in the acknowledgement of need and commitment, in speaking of it before God, with all the intelligence at one’s command, rejecting the evasions of inhibition, free from the masks of conformity.

That means prayer.⁴²

NOTES

1. *Berakhot* 10a.
2. R. Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford, 1986), p. 97, discussing the metaphysics of volition.
3. Emily Dickinson's lyric, "My period had come for Prayer" (#564, *Complete Poems*), describes such an experience:

"The Silence condescended— / Creation stopped—for Me— / But awed beyond my errand— / I worshipped—did not 'pray'—."

Her account is marred, from the perspective of halakhic prayer, by the quotation marks around "pray," with their implication that prayer is somehow transcended by the superior "worship." For Halakhah the initial experience of awe is expressed in the first three benedictions of the *amidah* which preface the petitionary core. Similarly *pesukei de-zimrah* precede *Shema* and *amidah*, providing a prolegomenon of praise to the morning liturgy. (See *Berakhot* 32a and *Avodah Zarah* 7b.) R. Hanina, in the context of *Berakhot* 34a, indicates that private petition is prohibited during the benedictions of praise.
4. On how to do this, see *Orah Hayyim*, 119.
5. *Prayer in the Talmud* (Walter de Gruyter, 1977), p. 186. The NT references are to Matthew 6 and 26; Mark 14.
6. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* IV, ch. 18.
7. *Ibid.*, ch. 20.
8. The Leibowitzian view of prayer furthers two major themes of his religious thought: on the one hand, the resolution of the science-religion issue by withdrawing God from ongoing involvement with the phenomenal world; on the other hand, the quasi-Kantian thesis that religious acts are significant only as acts of obedience to divine norms.
9. "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2, pp. 65–66.
10. *Mishnah Berakhot* 9:3.
11. "Redemption," p. 65.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
13. Cf. R. Soloveitchik, *ibid.*, pp. 69–70.
14. See *Divrei ha-Yamim* II 20:12 and Psalm 30:12 among other sources.
15. *Mishnah Berakhot* 5:5. R. Hanina's criterion of success should not be regarded as merely aesthetic. His statement is profoundly interpreted in the magnificent overture to R. Kuk's *Olat Re'iyah* I, pp. 26–27.
16. *Bereshit Rabbah* 45:5; cf. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:32; *Hullin* 60b.
17. Rashi to *Bereshit* 25:21. BDB (801b) lists three 'atr roots, denoting prayer, abundance, and associated with the smoke of incense, respectively. Etymology neither supports nor undermines Rashi's attempt to combine all three meanings.
18. Cf. R. Simha Zisl of Kelm, *Hokhmah u-Musar* Vol. II, #1, for whom the midrashic reading of 'atr as "wealth" means that "he is secure in the matter and not anxious about its absence. Isaac . . . poured out his prayer in wealth, not in penury." R. Simha Zisl thus defines Isaac's prayer in terms of a sense of destiny. Unlike our approach, however, his does not connect this to Isaac's situation. Furthermore, for R. Simha Zisl, petition is meant to intensify one's awareness of Providence, rather than to develop and sharpen one's understanding of one's needs.
19. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:5. The connection between 'atr and htr had already been made (*Sanhedrin* 103a) regarding *Divrei ha-Yamim* 33:13. Note that the Talmud appears to reflect a biblical text different from the printed one.
20. *Bereshit Rabbah* 70:11. Although one view (*Bereshit Rabbah* 63:5) maintains that Isaac prayed that Rebecca bear all his children, this is not implied by Jacob's remark to Rachel. Cf. Seforno to 25:21: "Although he was promised the seed that would inherit, he prayed that God grant him that seed, and from this worthy woman who confronted him."
21. *Gur Arye* to Rashi *ad. loc.* See also Maharal's *Commentary on Aggadah to Yevamot* 64. Mention must be made of the complex of ideas attached to the phrase *ma'asei avot siman la-banim* (e.g., Ramban, *Bereshit*) which stress the role of the patriarchs as types of Jewish history.

22. The connection between the consciousness of freedom and anxiety is a staple of existential philosophy. My usage is most closely rooted in Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* Part I, ch. 1, sec. 5 ("The Origin of Nothingness").
23. *Berakhot* 31b.
24. On Hannah's innovation of *tz-vaot* as an appellation of God, see my "Psalm 24 as the Key to Problem of Hashem S-vaot," *Gesher* 1976, pp. 170–71 and 179.
25. *Berakhot* 31a and Rashi to Samuel I 1:13.
26. *Berakhot* 24b. I would like to explain the distinction between the two objectionable utterances as follows. Praying audibly, as Rashi notes, may reflect the deficient belief that God cannot hear silent prayer. Praying loudly may be symptomatic of a perverted religion, much like the shouting of a lawyer with a weak argument or the demagogue's harangue. Loudness serves not to reach God, as it were, but to drown out any true response. Rashi cites Kings I 18:28 where the prophets of Baal cry out loudly in order to conceal the hollowness of their deity.
27. For details see *Orah Hayyim*, 101.
28. My resolution obviates the difficulties raised by R. Yehezkel Landau (*Tzelaḥ to Berakhot* 31a, s.v. *mi-kan*). Cf. Netziv, *Harḥev Davar to Bereshit* 18:22.
29. See *Shiurim le-Zekher Abba Mari*, vol. II, pp. 215–216 and "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," pp. 67–68. See also *Ra'yonot al ha-Tefillah* (in *Ish ha-Halakhah—Galuy ve-Nistar*), pp. 245–246.
30. In this connection, the Rav has referred orally to *Or ha-Hayyim*, *Shemot* 2:23.
31. *Berakhot* 31a. *Yalkut Shimoni* II 80, on Samuel I 2 (brought to my attention by Rabbi Irwin Haut and Netziv *ibid.*), states explicitly that Hannah recited *shemoneh esrei*.
32. Cf. Samson, whose commitment to God is not freely chosen, but dictated by God. Hannah's spiritual life counters the irresponsible disposition of children by their parents that betrays the religious instability of the Judges-Samuel period, e.g., Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11:30–40), Saul and Jonathan (Samuel I 14:41–45). See my discussion of this theme in "The Sphinx as Leader: A Reading of Judges 13–16," *Tradition* 14:3, pp. 66–79.
33. That the discussion of *ze'akah* liturgy in "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah" does not constitute a general theory of *ze'akah* phenomenology is demonstrable from the stages in the Rav's manuscripts of this essay.
34. *Mitzvah va-Lev* I (Tel Aviv, 5726) pp. 159–163.
35. Commentary to *Shemot* 13:16 (ed. Chavel, I 346–7); see notes 30–32. Cf. *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* (*Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Chavel I, pp. 152–3).
36. The audible repetition of the *amidah* is only apparently an exception. Willy-nilly the prayer must be repeated out loud to fulfill its minimal purpose of helping those who are unable to pray to discharge their obligation. But the public repetition has a more positive religious function as well, one that is significantly different from that of the private *amidah*. See G. J. Blidstein: "Sheliach Tzibbur: Historical and Phenomenological Observations," *Tradition* 12:1, pp. 69–77.
37. Among analytical philosophers who have discussed the matter, see I. Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" (in *Four Essays on Liberty* [Oxford, 1969]) and B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard, 1986). Cf. A. Donagan, "Consistency in Rationalist Moral Systems," *Journal of Philosophy* 81, pp. 291–309.
38. "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17:2, p. 26. My italics. Of course there are many situations of conflict in which Halakhah speaks unambiguously, e.g., the cases in *Kiddushin* 29b. This does not, however, exempt the individual from responsible judgment: if one's son, in one of the examples above, is better able to benefit from Torah study, the order of precedence is reversed.
39. These terms derive from Kierkegaard's discussion of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*.
40. Cited by T. Sowell, *Compassion Versus Guilt and Other Essays* (William Morrow, N.Y., 1987), p. 32.
41. Cf. R. Soloveitchik: "Catharsis," *Tradition* 17:2, pp. 38–54.
42. While the ideas and formulations in this essay are my responsibility alone, the most desultory reader will have noticed that my primary categories are borrowed from *maran ha-Rav* Joseph Soloveitchik, may God grant him long life and health, and that his influence has otherwise marked my mode of analysis. It has often been said that the idea of *mesorah* pertains not only to the content that is repeated but to the method of thought as

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well. If I have succeeded in properly extending the Rav's magnificent insights into prayer in particular, and the religious experience in general, this is the right occasion for me to express a healthy measure of thanks to Rabbi Wurzburger, who encouraged me to cultivate a close personal relationship with his *rebbe* and mine. For this, among many other things, I am in his debt. It is likewise a pleasure to mention those of my students with whom I have regularly shared my thinking on *tefillah*: Erica Schoonmaker Brown, Shoshana Jedwab, and especially Jerry Zeitchik, who commented on an earlier draft. A first stab at one section of this paper was written in response to an inquiry by Prof. F. Safran in December, 1987.