Editor's Note

"he thought she was drunk"

One passage declares:

> All I want is to follow the advice given by Elihu the son of Berachel of old who said, "I will speak that I may find relief;" for there is a redemptive quality for an agitated mind in the spoken word and a tormented soul finds peace in confessing. (*Lonely Man of Faith*)

Another, in the eulogy for R. Zeev Gold, confesses:

> From youth I was taught to control my feelings and not to exhibit what took place in my emotional world. Father said: the holier the feeling and the more intimate, the more it requires concealment in the depths. The outer chambers, where the human being highlights what is happening within him, must be separated from his Holy of Holies (Exodus 26:33). And what is holier than the Holy of Holies of emotional life?

Among the antinomies in R. Soloveitchik's thought this is not one that has evoked massive scholarship. The answer seems simple. For all that the Rav advertises his *Lonely Man* as the confession of an agitated soul, supposedly eschewing didactic ambition, eloquence and rhetorical balance, it is a lecture, not a personal confession. We learn nothing of the author's biography and, beyond the dedication to his wife, by then already stricken with her fatal illness, we hear nothing of his private life. *Lonely Man* is rather an essay in theological anthropology, with constant attention to the estrangement that shadows the relationship of the man of faith, who values the secular realm of majestic man, and his conflict with an environment, that values only the majestic, even among those who take part in organized religious community and its culture. There may be agitation, even torment, in this confrontation, but little intimacy. If anything, there is a tone of lament about the failure of intimacy in modern utilitarian society.

On occasion, the Rav did speak, with brutal frankness, about private experiences, his wife's death, his own encounter with cancer, and less

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brutally, but equally astonishingly, about the experience of Torah study, of Shabbat and Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana and the *Seder*. I do not recall that he ever claimed to be doing so to relieve his pain. To the contrary, I recall him observing that *gedolei Yisrael*, unlike Christian saints and mystics, avoided the confessional mode, but that in a culture where many people had no direct encounter with living religious existence, it was necessary to lift the veil between the outer chambers and the inner chambers. There was no other way to communicate the nature of religious life. And for all the power of the Rav's autobiographical presentation, his comments always served a clear religious-intellectual purpose: a more realistic understanding of suffering, the apprehension of death, the joy of communion with God, the wide range of *hovot ha-levavot* (duties of the heart). It was Torah, and had to be studied and taught.

There is a paradox here. The teacher who must incubate in the student a private, intimate experience and a sense of self that is rooted in a world of privacy and singularity, must, to some degree, make his, or her, existence transparent to the learner, without sacrificing the incommunicable dimension of that intimacy. He must lift the veil of privacy without tearing it and desecrating it. Occasionally the miracle of communication occurs, and the reduplication of the experience becomes possible.

II.

In the eulogy just cited, the Rav goes on to say:

> If it is good for a man, and his heart is full of joy, let him reveal his feelings to God…thank Him and yearn for Him; but not exhibit them to others, lest an alien gaze desecrate this holy of holies. If, to the contrary, it is bad for man, and he is given over to distress, beneath the yoke of suffering and affliction, and finds himself abandoned and forlorn—let him confess before God, weep and entreat Him behind the curtain, but let no stranger approach the holy of Holies lest he desecrate through his indifference the sanctity of mute suffering oppressing him (Leviticus 16:17).

To most readers of these words, the recommendation therein is not only terrifyingly harsh; it is almost literally impossible. The secular culture we inhabit, and which, despite ceremonial denials, often inhabits us, has little esteem for shame or modesty. The mass media, hungry for sensation, under the aegis of popularized Freudianism, revel in ever more naked exposure of intimate scenes and parading of private feelings. We may discern God's presence alongside us, not only in happy gossipy coincidences

and (for the hard headed) in perceptions of chastisement, but in His faithful companionship in the unspectacular everyday joys and sufferings that make up our real life. Yet largely lacking the sensitivity and often even the vocabulary with which to enlighten ourselves, our efforts at religious behavior are increasingly confined to public display. The religious education that comprises much of that behavior and regulates the rest has little patience for human inwardness, unless expressed in banal abstract clichés. To take the Rav seriously, and undertake to confide our deepest feelings to God instead of showing them in public and debasing them in the process, would require a radical reversal of our entire way of life.

Once in a while, we realize that something has gone wrong with our religious culture. We stray into the blogosphere and are dismayed by the "snarky," shameless gossip casually purveyed to all comers. On subway or sidewalk we are flabbergasted to see individuals whose perpetual phone and text activity reveal them to be constitutionally intolerant of the least moment of solitude; as if, like Bishop Berkeley's ideas, they would cease existing unless perceived by the social god. Or we are offended, and rightly embarrassed and pained, when members of our community discuss family trauma or sexual uncertainties in the open. At such moments we apprehend how forlorn we are to be bereft of the silent intimate companionship into which the Rav would initiate us. We are sorry to have veered from this path and we are sorry not to have offered a better example to others.

Yet there is more to our difficulty with the Rav's austere instruction than a sad, stubborn refusal of authentic religious individualism. What, indeed, do we discuss with God when we are alone with Him? For many, perhaps most of us, the most intimate entreaties concern our ability to understand those we love, and to be understood by them. We are young, and we place before God our craving for the initiation and approval of our mentors, for the friendship of the peers whose common effort and support will, if we are fortunate, accompany us through life, for the spouse with whom we can build the happiness of family life, and the human environment that can facilitate all this. We mature, and we come before Him with our hopes and fears for children and *talmidim*, we cry out our desire and anxiety to provide pride and sustenance to those who nurtured us and to whom we owe eternal gratitude in turn. Aging, we plead with Him not to forsake us, to enable us to continue serving those we care about, and for them to sustain us without our becoming a burden upon them. If the world witnessed the emotion summoned from us by those nearest and dearest, in all its labyrinthine complexity, if the curtain of

intimacy were stripped away, we should be thought insane and extravagant, ridiculous and overbearing. And if we allowed the world to catch us out we would indeed be all those things. So, in the intimacy of prayer, this love that dare not confess its fierceness is offered up on the altar in the individual's holy of holies.

Surely "the heart knows its distress, and in its joy no stranger shares" (Proverbs 14:10). Others, who may not know our feelings in their full intimacy, are nevertheless very much implicated in our emotional lives. An individual may be forced by circumstance to hide all aspects of his inner life from others; he or she may survive or even flourish in such emotional anonymity. Nevertheless, the Mishna recommends that we invest strenuous effort in "acquiring a friend;" as *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A* (chapter 8) glosses, the friend is one with whom you can discuss all your concerns, from Torah study to private affairs. Romantic attitudes place human love and the desire for transparency above all other goals. Judaism respects the passion but rejects the absoluteness: the most authentic human comradeship is the one that knows itself secondary to the God-relationship and is happy to take that position.

Thus the challenge of making our own the Rav's fundamental insight about the sanctity of religious intimacy and human privacy is not just the demand that we overcome our culture's merciless pressure to exhibit and to exist in public. At a deeper level, it is also a demand that we learn to invest ourselves in other people and allow them to become invested in us without violating the ultimate sense of intimacy that a human being confesses only before God.

III.

The classic paradigm for the intimacy of private prayer is *I Samuel* chapter 1: the prayer of Hannah in the sanctuary. R. Soloveitchik once explained why Hannah's prayer was answered that year and not previously. The reason is that on this visit to Shiloh, Elkana tried to comfort her, saying: "I am better to you than ten sons." It was then that Hannah knew how alone she was: even her loving husband did not understand her. This insight hammers home the message: we can only pray properly when we know the difference between our communion with God and our discourse with human beings, even with those who are close to us, let alone those with whom we have only a passing connection.

What about the rest of the story? Hannah withdrew to the sanctuary and prayed. The high priest Eli observes her in the act. He thinks she is drunk and her presence thus desecrates the holy place. As responsibility dictates, he orders her to sober up. Hannah replies that she has not drunk alcohol but has come to pour out her heart before God. What many readers do not notice is that Hannah does not tell Eli the cause of her distress. Having misjudged her, he is obliged to make amends. So he expresses the hope (blessing, prayer) that God grant her petition. Abarbanel was convinced that Eli must have been familiar with her predicament, but there is no evidence for this in the text: on the contrary, both Hannah's language and Eli's response indicate that the content of her plea was not part of their conversation. Is she barren or is her child ill or dead? Is she destitute, a grieving widow or the victim of an abusive husband? Is she herself mortally ill? She goes her way not having informed the priest and he does not intrude upon her privacy.

Would such circumspection be the rule nowadays? Eli would perhaps have earned a degree in social work or clinical psychology and he would have approached the unhappy woman with brochures on alcoholism and anything else that could ail her. He would have insisted on a follow up appointment and referred her to helping professionals. (Alas, from what we know of Eli's children, they would have been only too happy to step in!) Such conduct would be prudent, and in many instances it would be wise. The Biblical Eli, however, leaves her to God, bestowing only his good will.

What is the immediate consequence? Hannah returns to her husband; she eats; her face is no longer downcast. Years later she will return to Shiloh, confront Eli with the outcome of her quest, and dedicate Samuel to the service of God.

Hannah is the hero of this story, but Eli too rises to the occasion. He cannot provide her with the response that she can only obtain from God. Yet, without intruding on her privacy, without interposing himself between her and God, he succeeds in offering her the recognition and the blessing without which she could not have returned to the festival table, her spirit transformed. The relationship between the individual and God is absolute and intimate. "The heart knows its distress, and in its joy no stranger shares;" yet the stranger is more than an indifferent bystander to the individual's struggles. Eli opened his heart to a distress he did not understand and did not demand to understand. Eventually his own life is enriched by the joy in which he participates, although he could not anticipate its fulfillment.

IV.

The restoration of intimacy and privacy to human existence thus requires two educational movements. The obvious one is to direct the individual's attention to God. This entails placing restraints on our self-exhibition, re-learning the fundamental rabbinic teaching that to be a Jew is to have a sense of shame and that the relationship with God and the intimate dimensions of our bonds to others, and our communion with ourselves, are debased when they are put on display. It entails casting a critical eye, and separating ourselves from the frivolous scornful sessions (*moshav letsim*) that in contemporary culture pass for entertainment. It entails making time for solitude in our daily lives and encouraging others to do the same. No less important, it means, as much as possible, emancipating our religious culture from the relentless scrutiny of social pressure and curiosity, even well-meaning curiosity.

The other, complementary movement is that we must learn not only to be alone with God, but also to be alone with one another. Dubious public displays of private matters result not only from the absence of God in our lives but also from the absence of genuinely intimate modes of personal intercourse among people. Freud purported to liberate us by bringing unacknowledged secrets to light in the confessional of the consulting room. Freudianism has been eclipsed but not its cultural influence ("no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion"). Part of its baleful legacy is making a virtue of incessant discussion about matters of which everyone is aware but that modest individuals see no need to belabor. Another is the conviction that intimate desires, inclinations, and impulses that are not acted out must at least be talked about interminably. The compulsion to talk, to stretch sexuality on the rack and make it confess (to borrow Foucault's characterization) does not promote spiritual freedom: quite the contrary.

As religious individuals and Torah educators, we cherish intimacy and modesty and discourage foul language and unseemly preoccupation with sexual matters. Outwardly we oppose the Freudian climate of opinion. Nonetheless, let me ask you: Are we seen to represent an alternative? At our best, we know the difference between modesty and reticence about the intimate realm, on the one hand, and evasion and the awkward stifling of embarrassing difficulties, on the other hand. We understand the difference between prying and caring, between intrusion and solicitude. We are circumspect and welcoming. We can listen, as Eli listened to Hannah; we can correct initial misimpressions, as Eli recuperated from his; and

having listened, we can respond to each person according to their requirement of us.

Are we regularly seen to be at our best? We cannot take for granted our capacities of empathy and common sense—we must always be working on ourselves, refining, correcting. So long as our best is as much the exception as the rule, we must be constantly alert to the danger that many of the individuals who most need the example of religiously formed intimacy may be deterred from seeking it out, left to their own unformed emotional and spiritual devices.

Shalom Carmy