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Review Essay

DIGESTING THE EXODUS NARRATIVE: RAV SOLOVEITCHIK'S APPROACH TO THE SEDER EVE

*Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Festival of Freedom:
Essays on Pesah and the Haggadah*
Edited by JOEL B. WOLOWELSKY AND REUVEN ZIEGLER.
(Jersey City: Ktav, 2006.)

The essays in the sixth volume of the *MeOtzar HoRav* series, entitled *Festival of Freedom*, present the unique insights of R. Soloveitchik into the Seder eve. In classic R. Soloveitchik style, the exposition of the concepts and texts of the Seder presented in this book clarifies timeless themes and approaches while also introducing surprising and creative terminology that compels the reader to reconsider the Seder experience in dramatically new ways.

Due to the nature of this collection, generated from numerous unpublished manuscripts, as well as tapes of lectures, each essay stands alone as an independent presentation. And yet, a certain thematic unity seems to emerge from the various essays. Obviously, since R. Soloveitchik did not organize the distinct essays in this work himself, I am in part addressing the editorial decisions. Yet, it is certainly not surprising that while addressing the various aspects of the Seder R. Soloveitchik returns to similar themes. By focusing on the recurring ideas and language that R. Soloveitchik adopts in a number of these presentations, I think it is possible to distill his underlying view of the Seder experience. Appropriately enough, the opening essay lays the groundwork for this view.

CULINARY CATHARSIS

This first essay, entitled “An Exalted Evening: The Seder Night” begins with a series of recollections about R. Soloveitchik’s youthful experience

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of *leil ha-seder* and Yom Kippur eve. These memories give us access to R. Soloveitchik's personality; they grant us, especially those of us not privileged to encounter R. Soloveitchik directly, a kinship with R. Soloveitchik that allows us to more fully appreciate his wisdom. As such, they can be viewed as a rhetorical technique used to draw the reader into R. Soloveitchik's inner world. Yet, in terms of the argument of the essay, these stories presumably serve only to juxtapose the Seder night and Yom Kippur, setting the stage for their comparison.

However, it seems to me that these nostalgic musings serve a more central role in the presentation of this particular essay and the thought of R. Soloveitchik in general. I will justify this premise by more specifically drawing out the connection between this introduction and the body of the essay.

The heart of this first essay focuses on the *se'udah*, the festive meal. R. Soloveitchik systematically expounds on four differences between human and animal eating as a means of describing how the human being can transform this most biological, even animalistic, act into a distinctly human endeavor. Through a deeper understanding of the context of his eating, the human being can endow this basic survival function with spiritual meaning, can even recast his ingestion into an "eating before God."

I leave it to the reader to study all four categories and will suffice in this context with two comments that emerge from R. Soloveitchik's discussion of the last two distinctions. First, that through dialogue with guests at a meal the human being can transform biological consumption into a forum for fellowship, kindness, and education. The meal thus becomes a vehicle for creating community, specifically a community that reaches out to one another in order to share both material and spiritual wealth.

Second, that through his eating the human being can reaffirm his place in a covenantal community that transcends the present and connects the Jew with his past and future. When you can see your *se'udah* in the historical context of the Jewish people throughout the ages, then you renew your own commitment to the historical covenant.

Both of these elements, which theoretically could be realized at any meal, come clearly to the fore during the Passover Seder. The halakhic obligation to join together into a *havurah* ensures that the Seder will be a meal of sharing and *hesed*, while the obligation to recount the story of the exodus reminds all involved in the Seder meal of their shared historical tradition with the covenant at its center.

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This description of the Seder as a model for halakhic eating, which, according to the editor's introduction, was originally entitled "The Redemption of Eating," describes how the human being can elevate or redeem his natural, innate drives to the service of God. This discussion, consequently, corresponds to R. Soloveitchik's view of the redemption of human nature, originally formulated in print in his essay, "Catharsis."¹ Recalling that presentation helps clarify the conclusion of this essay, in which R. Soloveitchik draws out the dialectical relationship between the Seder and Yom Kippur. Employing kabbalistic terminology, R. Soloveitchik explains that the Seder primarily expresses the forward movement of *hesed*, where the Jew opens himself up to his fellow to create a community of existential fellowship, at least in part through the means described above. Yom Kippur, on the other hand, manifests the movement of *gevurah*, contraction or retreat, where the Jew retreats into and even from himself, as he denies himself pleasure and admits his sins. Though it is possible to notice some distinctions between the description of heroism in "Catharsis," which includes both advancement and retreat, and R. Soloveitchik's use of the terminology of *chesed* as opposed to *gevurah* in this essay, the similarities between the two discussions outweigh the differences. In both, R. Soloveitchik describes a dialectical movement of advancement and retreat, and also explains how this movement serves to purify or redeem basic elements of human nature.

FROM CATHARSIS TO ENCOUNTER

Yet, I believe that if we bear in mind the anecdotal introduction to the essay, it will significantly alter the impact of this discussion and add a critical element to the thesis of "Catharsis." In his opening, R. Soloveitchik bombards his audience with the sights, sounds, and smells of his own Seder and Yom Kippur experience. And though he admits that these emotional memories are naïve and childish, he does not dismiss them. As he moves to a more mature analysis of the connection between these holidays, R. Soloveitchik proceeds to introduce the concept of *Halakha she-ba-lev*. This notion of the spiritual and experiential component of the halakha forces R. Soloveitchik to further question the relationship between these evenings, despite the clear halakhic distinctions. And it leads him to the following thought:

I thought long and hard about this problem, and I have arrived at the following conclusion. The common experience on both nights is man's

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encounter with God. On the night of the exodus, the people met God, had a rendezvous with Him, and made His acquaintance for the first time. On Yom Kippur night, man gets very close to his Father in heaven, again meets Him, talks to Him, cries before and implores Him. The grandeur and singularity of these two nights lie in the God-man confrontation. (3)

Though externally the halakhot of these two holidays imply that they are completely distinct, R. Soloveitchik finds in each a similar element of encounter with God. R. Soloveitchik does not elaborate on this point in the continuation of the essay, but he also does not imply in any way that he has dismissed it. Consequently, we should consider the implications of this idea of encounter in the later discussion of *se'udah*. Moreover, the recognition of the significance of this encounter allows us to more fully appreciate R. Soloveitchik's nostalgic preamble.

It seems that the entire notion of *Halakha she-ba-lev*, introduced in this context by R. Soloveitchik with hardly a word of explanation, directly connects to his "childish" recollections presented earlier. Those memories, and presumably many others like them, formed the basis for his own experience of the halakha, and laid the groundwork for his conviction that the halakha includes more than logic and reason. At the very least, his presentation of those memories in this context helps introduce his audience to this *halakha she-ba-lev*. But I think it does more. For it is precisely on the basis of the sensory overload of his childhood experience—what he describes as "the wellspring of my colorful religious life"—that R. Soloveitchik concludes that these nights are moments of encounter with God.

To justify this assertion, I turn to a critical discussion about experiencing God from an earlier volume in the *MeOtzar HoRav* series, *Worship of the Heart*.² In that work, R. Soloveitchik pinpoints the aesthetic approach as the means for encounter with God. After elaborating on the meaning of the cognitive and ethical gestures, R. Soloveitchik contrasts these with the aesthetic experience. He writes:

If we speak of experiencing God, and if by this we understand the ecstatic encounter of a man quivering with passion and tenseness, then one cannot consider the ethical or noetical act as capable of engendering such an experience. . . .

Only the aesthetic experience, if linked with the idea of the exalted, may bring man directly into contact with God, living, personal, and intimate. Only through coming in contact with the beautiful and exalt-

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ed may one apprehend God instead of comprehending Him, feel the embrace of the Creator, and the warm breath of infinity hovering over a finite creation. The reason for immediacy and impact implicit in the aesthetic experience is its sensuous character. (59)

A full discussion of the relationship between the ethical, the intellectual, and the aesthetic is beyond the current presentation.³ However, it clearly emerges from this passage that for R. Soloveitchik the experience of God is necessarily through the aesthetic quality, and as R. Soloveitchik mentions in the conclusion of the passage and more fully explains earlier in that work, the aesthetic experience is necessarily through the senses:

By the aesthetic, I understand the all-inclusive human experience by virtue of which one apprehends oneself and the surrounding world as an immediate, constant contact with reality at the qualitative, sensible levels. . . . The aesthetic gesture is a sensuous experience. . . . Beauty is apprehended, not comprehended. . . . (42)

If the human being can in fact encounter God, then it must be in the form of a *human* experience, and that is necessarily an aesthetic one.⁴ As surprising as this might be, R. Soloveitchik clearly demands a sensual quality to the experience of God. Otherwise, for him, there is no real *experience* to speak of—understanding, perhaps, but not experience.

As R. Soloveitchik explains, the intellectual and the ethical address the universal; they are constant. What is ultimately true is true for everyone at all times; likewise what is authentically good or right is right for everyone at all times.⁵ But the aesthetic deals with the particular and the temporal. It is what a specific individual experiences at a specific time. Therefore if it is possible to experience God, then that means that a particular human being can connect to God at a particular time. This by definition is an aesthetic and not intellectual or ethical movement.

Seen in light of this understanding of the aesthetic, those memories of R. Soloveitchik's youth take on added significance. They set the tone by telling the reader that he or she is entering the experiential realm of the aesthetic which allows for encounter with God. In maturity, R. Soloveitchik realized that the sights, sounds, and smells of his youthful experience truly reflected the aesthetic quality of those holy days and established them as moments of connection with God.

Clearly, the perception of a child, even R. Soloveitchik as a child, does not suffice to justify the import of the Seder. Rather, those descriptions of R. Soloveitchik's youth introduce the possibility that the Seder and Yom

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Kippur include the aesthetic element necessary for real encounter with God. In the body of the essay, R. Soloveitchik moves beyond this simplistic notion to develop the true nature of this encounter. To do that, he must establish how the Seder contains the aesthetic element essential for encounter inherently, and not only in the particular atmosphere created in the Soloveitchik home. His discussion of *se'udab* does exactly that by demonstrating the halakhic transformation of the sense of taste into an opportunity “eat before God.”

R. Soloveitchik's discussion of the *se'udab* in this essay is consequently an important extension of the ideas presented in “Catharsis.” Here, R. Soloveitchik not only explains how we can redeem our everyday eating. In the Seder meal, eating is not simply permissible and appropriate – it is commanded. R. Soloveitchik guides us toward an understanding of this commandment by presenting his view of eating only after first establishing that the Seder is an evening of encounter with God. Since encounter for R. Soloveitchik is necessarily an aesthetic gesture requiring sensory experience, our eating becomes the essential means allowing for this encounter. It is precisely the eating of the *se'udab* that allows the Seder to become an experience of confrontation with God.

RABBAN GAMLIEL AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SEDER

R. Soloveitchik does not explicitly relate to the particular eating of the Seder in that first essay. He opens the discussion with the claim “the Seder is the prototype of the *se'udab*” (3), but he does not illustrate this premise explicitly in this essay. In the later essays, however, he more directly addresses the type of eating that the Seder expects through his discussion of the critical statement of Rabban Gamliel.

In two separate essays, R. Soloveitchik presents an analysis of the statement of Rabban Gamliel that appears toward the end of the *Maggid* section. Rabban Gamliel requires us to explain the significance of the *mitsvot* of eating the paschal sacrifice, the matsah, and the bitter herbs in order to fully discharge our obligation during the Seder meal. In his first mention of this dictum in the essay, “The Symbolism of the Matzah,” R. Soloveitchik explains the position of Nahmanides that sees Rabban Gamliel's statement in reference not to the commandment of retelling the story of the exodus, *sippur yetsi'at Mitsrayim*, as many claim, but rather to the very commandment to eat these items under discussion. If we have not explained the significance of our actions, then we have not, at

least ideally, fulfilled our obligation to eat the paschal sacrifice, the matsah, and the bitter herbs. According to Nahmanides, the performance of the mitzva “must communicate a memory, or express an inner experience, related to servitude and freedom” (58), and requires more than simply eating. R. Soloveitchik then proceeds in that essay to discuss the particular significance of the eating of the matsah.

R. Soloveitchik again refers to Rabban Gamliel in the essay, “Seders of Denigration and Praise,” as he explains the structure of the *Maggid* portion of the Seder. In that context, R. Soloveitchik emphasizes how Rabban Gamliel joins the obligations to eat with the obligation to tell the story. He writes:

Rabban Gamliel . . . conveys a new form of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim*. As we saw, the first unit of *sippur* is *halakha*, studying the laws. The second unit is *sippur* per se, recounting the story in compliance with the standards of “beginning with denigration and ending with praise.” The third unit, Rabban Gamliel’s dictum, is *sippur* through *ma’aseh*, symbolic actions. Rabban Gamliel explains the symbolism of our actions, and this unit is completed only when one actually eats the matzah and *maror*. (98)

In both contexts, R. Soloveitchik points to Rabban Gamliel as the source for the inherent connection between the particular *mitsvot* of eating at the Seder and the telling of the story of the exodus. He even returns to the position of Nahmanides in the latter essay (116), explaining how the eating becomes an expression of the *sippur*.

R. Soloveitchik’s description of Rabban Gamliel’s statement, that it contains the critical bridge between the mitzva of *sippur* and the *mitsvot* of eating, elegantly explains the structure of the Seder and its inherent unity. However, seen in the light of our analysis of the opening chapter of this book, we can add another layer of significance to this discussion; for it is Rabban Gamliel who most clearly articulates the process that allows our *se’udah* to become a vehicle for connection with God. He is the one who, according to Nahmanides, is not satisfied with eating the *pesah*, matsah, and *maror* as technical commandments, but rather demands that our consumption be contextualized within the story of the Exodus. He is the one that requires us to articulate our connection to the historical legacy of the Jewish people as a prerequisite to our eating. This expression of the context and meaning of these *mitsvot* is precisely what allows us to transform our eating into eating before God as described in the first essay. It seems that Rabban Gamliel’s statement

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serves as the source for this fundamental connection between understanding and experience that R. Soloveitchik uses as the basis for his theory of confrontation.

THE HALLEL EXPERIENCE

I would like to investigate one other discussion in this book that, to my mind, is dramatically enhanced when we come to it from the premise of encounter established in the opening essay. Immediately after his discussion of Rabban Gamliel in “Seders of Denigration and Praise” R. Soloveitchik presents his position that the Seder eve is not simply a retelling of the events of the past, but is in fact a re-experiencing of them. He writes:

We state that the events that transpired are not only relevant to us—as we said at the very beginning of the Seder—but that they are a part of our living experience. The exodus is not an event that occurred in antiquity; every year it is reenacted, restaged, and relived. The past spills over into the present, and the exodus turns into a contemporary event. (103)

R. Soloveitchik makes this point in order to explain the shift in the Seder from *sippur*, telling the story, to *Hallel*, praising God. Hymnal thanksgiving as expressed through the *Hallel* can only result from emotional immediacy. It cannot flow simply from understanding the past.

While relevance is a good enough reason for the story to not be forgotten, it is not sufficient grounds for suddenly proclaiming a hymn to God with ecstasy and enthusiasm. . . . One can never sing with ecstasy unless one feels emotionally aroused. (103)

Shira can only occur in response to the present. Thus, R. Soloveitchik claims that if the halakha expects us to sing out in praise to God for the events of the exodus, then we must re-experience the exodus in the present.

Though interesting and powerful, this idea presents a profound difficulty. What does it mean to authentically re-experience the past? No matter how intensely we discuss the details of the exodus, it seems that we are still only describing the past; we are obviously not actually leaving Egypt. R. Soloveitchik articulates the expectation that we are to re-experience the past, but he doesn't clarify how we can accomplish that goal.

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Once again, I think that employing R. Soloveitchik's use of the term aesthetic can assist our understanding. Recall, that R. Soloveitchik used the term aesthetic to describe our immediate contact with reality, that is, our sensory experience. He also contrasted this aesthetic gesture with the intellectual movement of understanding. Understanding is abstract and as such is removed from the level of immediate experience. Consequently, I would claim that when R. Soloveitchik speaks of re-experiencing the exodus, he does not mean that everyone needs to imagine that they are leaving Egypt. We are not walking out of Egypt, nor is our goal to somehow convince ourselves that we are. Instead, it means that we cannot suffice with an abstract, intellectual discussion of the exodus. The Seder must include an immediate, aesthetic element and not simply an intellectual one. We don't need to have the same experience as the Jews who left Egypt; we just need to confront the exodus at the experiential level.

Yet again we ask—how do we do this? Following our earlier discussion, it seems that one way in which we create an aesthetic performance at the Seder is through our eating. Since eating is a sensory gesture it contains the immediacy of the aesthetic. When we eat because of the exodus then the exodus becomes a live experience. This approach adds another layer to our earlier discussion about *se'udab*.

However, in the particular context of his approach to *Hallel*, R. Soloveitchik expands on his definition of the aesthetic and the immediacy of experience—for he does not discuss eating. He speaks not of a sensory immediacy, but of an emotional one—“One can never sing with ecstasy unless one feels *emotionally* aroused” (103, emphasis added). The emotional state of a human being, like the sensory, reflects an experiential reality. It differs, too, from the abstract nature of the intellectual and the ethical, by being immediate and personal.

Consequently, when R. Soloveitchik demands that we experience the exodus in the present, he wants us to move from the intellectual to the aesthetic. This is done by enmeshing our understanding of the past with a sensory and emotional experience in the present. Once the story of Egypt creates an emotional reality in the present, we have entered the realm of the aesthetic experience and can naturally and appropriately proceed to proclaim our thanksgiving to God. It is not possible for us to have the same experience as those who actually left Egypt; nor are we expected to pretend that we can. Instead we have our own experience, by allowing ourselves to respond to the exodus at the emotional level and giving our Seder an authentic sense of immediacy.

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Moreover, this understanding of R. Soloveitchik's intention when speaking of the Seder as re-experiencing the exodus returns us to our premise of Seder as an evening of encounter. Our initial turn to R. Soloveitchik's view of the aesthetic was motivated by the need to understand the connection between the sensory element of eating at the Seder and R. Soloveitchik's view of the Seder as a confrontation with God. Once we understood how for R. Soloveitchik any experiential connection to God must flow through the immediacy of the aesthetic, we could appreciate the significance of the sensory elements at the Seder. But we have just shown how there is another path toward experiential immediacy—the emotional. And, not surprisingly, R. Soloveitchik likewise explains in *Worship of the Heart* how our emotional reality can serve as a bridge connecting us to God.

In the opening essay of that book, R. Soloveitchik outlines the various media of religious experience. In describing the emotional medium he writes:

The emotional approach to God via the ecstatic leap into the beyond is to be considered a direct beholding of Him. There is no need for additional visionary perceptions characteristic of prophecy. The feeling of His presence, companionship and closeness is vivid and overpowering. (7)

You can connect to God, authentically, through your emotional state. R. Soloveitchik considers this “a direct beholding of Him” even though he clearly distinguishes this from classical prophetic encounter.

Later on in the book, R. Soloveitchik describes the reality of man's communal connection to God. There too, he describes how connecting to God must be an aesthetic or immediate experience.

Relationships between abstract entities are only formal, mathematical: hence they cannot create community-bonds and commitments. A community of existence can only emerge when there is an encounter at the concrete level of sensuous portraiture, realizing the presence of the parties committed to a common destiny. The persons involved in a communal venture must experience each other. Only the feeling of closeness can promote community awareness. Otherwise, companionship is a meaningless word. (62)

He goes on to clarify how the emotional reality of the human being in addition to sensory immediacy can create an authentic connection to God.

When we speak of religious sensuousness we must note carefully that

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there are many senses to this term. Religious sensuousness may denote actual sensuous representation of religious material. . . .

On the other hand, religious sensibility may manifest itself... in experiential immediacy. Contact is established with the Almighty in the abyss of a warm heart, in a love-sick soul, in the experience of the invisible, in the richness of inner life, in being aware of something supernal, great, awesome and beautiful, although this “something” is neither seen nor heard. However devoid of sensuous material this feeling is, it is still an immediate reality, whose impact upon the religious person is enormous. In a word, the aesthetic experience of God, whether constructed of impressions and sensations drawn from our daily life, where man is engrossed in images and psychophysical sensuous processes, or consisting of ecstatic emotions, in the throbbing of the heart and the longing of the soul, is the basis of the community of God and man. (63)

These discussions in *Worship of the Heart* clearly express R. Soloveitchik’s position that the emotional state of the human being can be used as a vehicle for confrontation with God.⁶ Consequently, we can understand how his discussion of *Hallel* in *Festival of Freedom* likewise supports his overall view of the Seder as an opportunity for such a confrontation. The emotional state at the Seder that allows us to burst forth in praise of God reflects an experiential immediacy that connects man to God. This, as we have just seen in *Worship of the Heart*, is in fact an instance of encounter with God that compares with prophecy. This is precisely what R. Soloveitchik described in the opening essay.

ENCOUNTERING THE EXODUS

When R. Soloveitchik initially speaks of the Seder night as a night of encounter, he specifically refers to the historical exodus—“On the night of the exodus, the people met God, had a rendezvous with Him and made His acquaintance for the first time” (3). And yet, I have argued that through his description of the eating at the Seder and the singing of *Hallel* R. Soloveitchik in effect lays the conceptual framework to enable every one of us to transform our own Seder into an experience of encounter with God. This work, with both the broad thesis of encounter that I have tried to develop in this essay, as well as the many particular insights that I have not touched upon, is indeed a welcome addition to the growing library of R. Soloveitchik’s thought.

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NOTES

1. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978):38-54.
2. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2003).
3. For such a discussion, see Joshua Amaru, "Prayer and the Beauty of God: Rav Soloveitchik on Prayer and Aesthetics," review of *Worship of the Heart*, edited by Shalom Carmy, *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 13(2005): 148-76.
4. It is, however, possible to expand the notion of the aesthetic beyond the narrowly sensual. I will return to this later in my discussion of *Hallel*. A more complete understanding of the scope of the aesthetic is critical for understanding R. Soloveitchik's view on prophecy in general and its particular presentation in his work, *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham*, (Hebrew, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979).
5. See *Worship of the Heart*, pp. 40-1.
6. Once we realize the role of the emotional and sensory aspects of religious experience, it is possible to pursue the more complex relationship between these two and the intellectual and ethical. R. Soloveitchik does just that in the second half of his essay, *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham*.