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WITHOUT INTELLIGENCE, WHENCE PRAYER?

If he forgot it was *Shabbat* and continued as on weekdays . . . he should complete the blessing *honen ha-da'at* [who endows with intelligence]. This is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi, who said: “I wonder how they could eliminate *honen ha-da'at* on *Shabbat*. If there is no intelligence, whence prayer?”

*(Jerusalem Talmud)*¹

Truly it is not only in man's material ambitions, in which he resembles the beast, that he requires the Torah's measures to circumscribe and order them, but also for his lofty spiritual ambitions, including the foundations and ramifications of prayer, he requires the limits and appraisal of the Torah. . . . Therefore it is improper for a man hastily to abandon occupation in Torah for the sake of prayer.

*(Rav Abraham Isaac Kook)*²

I don't believe in artificial nostrums. Much is affected by the religious atmosphere, suffused with superficial instrumentalism; much is due to the tendency towards ceremonialization—which is, at times, vulgarization, of religion; and much is brought about by the lack of a serious capacity for introspection and examination of the world and oneself.

*(Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik)*³

Few human enterprises, leaving aside for the moment those we share with our fellow animals, are as universal as prayer. Common human experiences impel us to worship a Being beyond our comprehension, to praise what we admire, to express our needs in hope of

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their satisfaction, to be grateful for benefactions received, to cry out in pain and remorse before the One who can ease and reconcile our distress. Yet rarely are our fellow human beings as opaque to us as in the activity of prayer. Reciting our way through the same words and paragraphs as our neighbors, whether alone or in unison, silent or shouting, their thoughts and motives remain firmly closed to us.

Hardly less obscure to us are our own thoughts and motives. For observant Jews, routine is surely one of the motives, and obligation is surely present in our thoughts. Both fully observant Jews and more transient worshippers cherish the hope that prayer will do them some good as well, that it will leave us happier, more elevated in spirit, more at peace with ourselves. Frequently we enter into the words themselves, as we are instructed to: we perform the gestures of praise, petition, and thanksgiving mapped out in the *Amida*; we accept the yoke of God and His commandments when reading *Shema*; we confess specific sins and ask for His forgiveness. And when we enter into the words we are reciting, as part of our entering into the holy words of the prayer, we set aside many of our imaginings of the good we hope for, concentrating instead on the requests and expressions spelled out in the prayers themselves.

Prayer is thus an endeavor that baffles the categories of the transparently public and the intimately private. Just as surely, prayer, both in its narrow definition as the *Amida*, and in the broader usage that coincides with the *Siddur*, challenges the distinction between religion as a mode of seeking to satisfy our own desires, however elevated, and religion as the service of the heart, offered up to God in response to His demand, liberated from any aspiration to reward. On the one hand, Jewish prayer is a *mitsva* among others, circumscribed by external gesture, performed at regular times and in a set order. On the other hand, prayer is meaningless unless it wells from the depths of the heart, while standing in the presence of the living God.

Metaphysical dialectic engenders sociological paradox. Even those modern Jews who often complacently settle for the lowest common denominator of halakhic observance, may yet, with urgent pangs of emptiness and regret, rue a desultory *Amida* as an irretrievable opportunity for spiritual growth, unaccountably squandered. At the same time, we witness individuals and entire congregations, ostensibly committed to maximal halakhic achievement, who are, most of the time, oddly and even militantly lax in their conduct with respect to prayer, awakening periodically to the same burden of guilt and shame that affects their more liberal brethren. Unlike other “duties of the heart,” prayer is too

ubiquitous and public a feature of our lives to permit perpetual evasion and self-deception. Failure is too frequent to protect our ease of mind. For precisely when our *need* for prayer is greatest the staleness of a myriad indolent recitations rises to the tongue like heartburn; neglect sputters in our spiritual arteries like rusty water in a disused pump.

Can thinking about prayer improve the quality of our prayer? Why not? One reason that thought about prayer might interfere with prayer is that the two are distinct activities. Praying is praising, petitioning, thanking and so forth. Thinking about prayer is philosophizing. The contradiction is as patent as Yogi Berra's famous contention that you can't hit and think at the same time. Commenting on R. Hamnuna's dictum that "the time of Torah is separate from the time for prayer" (*Shabbat* 10a), Rav Kook asserts that Torah provides man with novel intellectual insights. By contrast, "prayer deals not with the discovery of new knowledge and the enrichment of the human intellect with their truth, but with the utilization of already attained knowledge, and to deepen through the power of feeling the imprint of moral knowledge on the powers of the soul."⁴ In a narrower connection, the Mishna's condemnation of the individual who calls upon God to have mercy on us as on the bird's nest of *Devarim* 22:6, R. Kook insists on the inappropriateness of introducing theological fine points into the text of prayer: "One is confusing, by calculations of profound wisdom and speculating on reasons for the *mitsvot*, the majestic feeling that should be natural and simple and whole-hearted in prayer."⁵

A more sweeping objection to the intellectualization of prayer, in our time, is expressed by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. What *kavvana* (intention) do you have when you pray, he asks a prominent *rosh yeshiva*: what do you actually think about? And when the scholar replies that he contemplates "the connection between the sentences, the words, the various sections. . . ." says Steinsaltz, "I snapped that this is something to do on *Shabbat* afternoon after the cholent."⁶ It is treating the prayer as a text to be analyzed rather than an utterance to be appropriated and expressed. The illusion that this scholarship is *kavvana* becomes an obstacle to genuine prayer.

It is easy for those familiar with these pitfalls, and for others who take for granted a romantic critique of cerebration, to condemn intellectual work as a death of the heart, in the spirit of Wordsworth's "we murder to dissect." And yet, as the *Yerushalmi* states, "if there is no intelligence, whence prayer?" Feelings do not exist separate from the beliefs with which they are bound inextricably. Words take on their significance

within the framework of larger verbal structures and rituals. We would not dream of launching into a speech of crucial import without a prior grasp of its structural unfolding and social context. To do so would achieve, not an eloquent spontaneity, but a gibbering muddle. No more can one undertake to pray without knowing the order and significance of the *seder ha-tefillot*, without appreciating the intention that our words endeavor to encompass. All this requires familiarity and depth, not ignorance and thoughtlessness. You can't philosophize or halakhicize and simultaneously pray—but you can make yourself ready, and clear the intellectual and experiential space in which *tefilla* can happen.

R. Kook and R. Soloveitchik, the master thinkers of Torah Judaism in our age, both devoted a considerable portion of their theological and halakhic work to prayer. What distinguishes them from their medieval predecessors is their commitment to intellectual reflection as a means of overcoming modern man's alienation from authentic prayer. Their explicit goal is not only to understand prayer as a halakhic and religious phenomenon, or to contribute to the elucidation of philosophical conundrums relating to prayer. They are at least as concerned to evoke the nature of *tefilla* in a manner that will initiate and enhance its proper, heartfelt performance. If, recognizing as we do the gap between thinking about prayer and actually praying, we hope to harness the former in the service of the latter, we are fortunate to resort to their pages and enter into their preoccupations.

Our task in this paper is to look at a variety of ways in which the study of prayer is useful, or essential, to a satisfactory, and satisfying, practice of prayer. We will frequently appeal to the work of R. Kook and R. Soloveitchik and, when necessary, attempt to confront, and to surmount, unresolved barriers to the translation of their ideas from paper to experience. It is not my purpose to report a typical cross section of these thinkers' rich, inexhaustible creativity in this area, or to undertake the detailed line-by-line analysis that their texts often reward. The selection of examples and problems reflects my own concerns—the difficulty in summoning up spontaneity, the advantages and pitfalls of intellectual reflection, the tension between the intimate and the public faces of prayers, the coexistence of the stormy, vigorous life of prayer, and the desire for inner peace through prayer. Nonetheless I hope that my obsessions, filtered through the experience of the great twentieth century interpreters of prayer, will strike a chord in my readers' hearts.

I. DARING TO START—SPONTANEITY AND COMPULSION

Immediately one acknowledges the vacuity of soulless prayer, the Satan, as it were, rubs his hands in glee and breaks into a filibustering jig. For how can we address God from within our present torpor? Must one not first attain the proper state of mind, and only then pray? First, then, pray for *kavvana*. But in order to pray for *kavvana*, one must already possess the requisite second-order *kavvana*. Yet this too is elusive unless one has already started along the road that leads to God. The result of this infinite regress is either a paralysis of despair or a comedy of Sartrean *mauvais foi* in which the individual tries very hard to coincide with his, or her, role, down to the physical exertions and facial contortions, but succeeds only in pretending to become what one wants to be. Self-consciousness, it would seem, sucks us deeper and deeper into the spiritual quicksand. Mindless behavioral conformity suddenly looks like a tolerable, albeit unattractive, solution.

Viewed superficially, the psychological obstruction becomes greater in the light of R. Soloveitchik's teaching that *tefilla* requires a *mattiv*, meaning that we are permitted to pray only because God has commanded us to pray, and that our speech is acceptable to Him only because the words of prayer are provided to us by Scripture. The difficulty of beginning is compounded by the belief that, in ourselves, we are unworthy to approach God, and that the infinite qualitative distance between man and God is bridged, not in fellowship, but only through the experience of being commanded.

At a deeper level, however, the Rav's doctrine, which seems to impede *tefilla*, ends up facilitating it. Despite our unworthiness, we know that infinite God, for reasons that may well be incomprehensible to us, has chosen to require our prayer, and to hear our personal, self-interested petitions as the fulfillment of His command. We also know that our predecessors, men and women whom we cannot hope to emulate, have cleared the way before us. Prayer, therefore, is not merely an imposition on God's attention, as it were, or an absurd raid on His inarticulate and immeasurable exaltation. It is a duty that we cannot shirk. Imperative thunder casts out inhibition.

By the same token, the knowledge that prayer is a privilege, a psychological necessity that yet is not a right, precludes treating prayer as a casual activity. At the root of our inability to pray seriously we often find an inability to take ourselves seriously, to honor our genuine needs, our joys, our troubles and devotions, as worthy of our own solemn con-

cern. The Rav's insistence that we recognize the tremor of unworthiness, the compulsory invitation that underlies our engagement in prayer, is thus of a piece with his stress on the vigorous, honest assertion of one's needs before Him. Knowing that one requires, and is endowed with, a divine summons to prayer, becomes the starting point for the prayerful enterprise.

The difficulty of initiating prayer is implicitly met by one of R. Kook's key concepts: "the perpetual prayer of the soul."⁷ According to R. Kook, the soul ever expresses itself in prayer, even when the prayer is subterranean, so to speak, and surreptitious. Worship of God through Torah and wisdom is a disclosure of this concealed prayer. Actual prayer is its realization, which R. Kook compares to the opening of a flower towards the dew or towards the sun. The prolonged absence of prayer with *kavvana* causes blockage in the flow of prayer, and this deficiency mends only gradually with the renewal of unobstructed channels. Yet R. Kook cherishes the idea of incessant, unconscious prayer. Proper prayer, he states, "can only arise from the thought that the soul truly prays perpetually."

Why is the belief in unconscious, pre-conscious prayer so important for R. Kook? In the context of the passage under discussion, the most plausible explanation is that prayer's constancy identifies the rhythm of worship with the unbroken cadence of the cosmos. Prayer is natural to man and to the universe of which he is a part. At the same time, the prayer that hums through our bodies without interruption ought not to be vulnerable to the metaphysical stutter that threatens to prevent the individual from getting started.

The institution of Psalm 51:17 ("God, open my lips . . .") as the obligatory preamble to the *Amida* makes the prayer for prayerfulness part of the prayer itself. R. Soloveitchik's emphasis on the integral place of this verse in the *Amida* may thus offer a halakhic parallel to the phenomenology we have just derived from R. Kook. The recitation of this verse, acknowledging that our lips open in prayer only when God graciously opens them, inaugurates the prayer itself.

Contrary to the popular notion that informal prayer is more fluent and more authentic, our previous discussion points to the conclusion that a fixed, formal liturgy serves better to counteract the danger of self-conscious paralysis. It goes without saying that genuine participation in an orderly, structured ritual presupposes, at the very least, a tacit understanding of the words, gestures and shape of the activity.

Standard Jewish worship follows a fixed text. While an Anglican like

C. S. Lewis, who tackles the problem of getting started in the first chapter of his *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, appreciates the value of an established text in averting meandering, stillborn prayer, we ordinarily associate a proclivity for impromptu prayer, audible and public, with a certain kind of Protestant piety. When Jews get “spirituality,” we often perceive this, not always incorrectly, as a rejection of traditional Jewish prayer and a hankering for emotional outpourings we stigmatize as Christian, above all as a preference for a framework that does not place so much weight on experiencing the liturgy as it stands, with all its structural and linguistic depth and sophistication.

It is natural that we lament such tendencies as reflexes of ignorance and intellectual shallowness, and that we combat the separation of thought from feeling through lines of reasoning like those utilized throughout this essay. It is even easier to caricature a Christianity of unctuous tones and pious swagger; the preachy hectoring that bullies a congregation while poking an argumentative finger in the divine solar plexus, as it were; the unguarded silliness and the inevitable theological solecisms.⁸

Nevertheless, the Christian practice of formulating prayer spontaneously, and out loud, forces the individual to take responsibility for his or her petitions, whatever the embarrassing or unfortunate results. By contrast, the Jew, or any other devotee of a set liturgy, who is unready to fully appropriate the text, is liable to relinquish personal identification with the words that he, or she, utter, and to merge completely into the anonymous gray mumble of civic routine.

Profound tensions run through our spiritual lives in general, and our experience of prayer in particular: tensions between formal structure and untutored spontaneity; between the discriminating consciousness and the unleashing of raw spiritual energy; between individual and community; between intimacy and public accessibility. Before continuing our discussion, let me take the liberty of exhibiting a passage from a contemporary work of fiction. The early sections of David Duncan’s novel *The Brothers K* depict a family of Seventh Day Adventists some forty years ago. In the following scene, children are invited to improvise prayer at Sunday school. The irrepressible volunteer, as usual, is a hare-lipped girl. Keeping before us her effusion, and the narrator’s reaction, may help us to recall how much is at stake in our philosophical exploration of the subject, how startling and wondrous and terrifying:

‘Nyelp us to nlove nyou nmore and nmore!’ she prays as Micah laughs outright, ‘and nmore and nmore!’ she pleads as girls grab Kleenex, ‘and snill

nyet nmore! she begs as boys fizz up and overflow like jostled bottles of pop. *Nenter our narts!* she cries, her voice breaking, her body trembling so violently it makes my chair tremble too. *Nenter nthem now! Nright now! Nwee are nso nlost, nso nvery nlost, nwithout nThee!* And even as it occurs to me that this must be real prayer—even as I see that what is being laughed at is the sound of someone actually ramming a heartfelt message past all the crossed signals and mazes of our bodies, brains and embarrassments clear on in to her God—when I open my fists I see a face so exposed, so twisted with love, grief and longing, that if she was my sister I would take off my coat, and I’d wrap her up and hold her, and I would beg her never, ever to do this naked, passionate, impossible thing again.⁹

II. HOW DOES REFLECTION HELP?

The exposed face, whose prayer we have just listened in on, belongs to an unsophisticated child, though one should not underestimate how much her vocabulary and cadences owe to the grown ups. As R. Soloveitchik often reminded us, the authentic religious personality never stops identifying with the immediacy of the child’s experience.¹⁰ Yet our perspective cannot help but expand towards a greater complexity. On the one hand, our mature emotional palette is, or should be, more variegated and subtle than the child’s. On the other hand, perhaps for that very reason, the connection between emotional life and ritual response is less vivid. When, at times, the adult posture towards the world becomes, not childlike, but positively childish, jaded and immature at once, one wonders whether any emotional vitality subsists that can be redeemed in the name of religion. Pampered, worldly wise souls are calloused and anesthetized, in a way that keeps out the love and grief and longing, while underneath the hardness and the haze, a mute discomfort reigns, that is to the love and grief and longing of the striving spirit like chronic nausea to an athlete’s honest agony.

To overcome this order of spiritual numbness means both to make the individual emotionally sensitive and to refine his, or her, intellect. Early in his *Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto invited the reader to direct his mind to moments of deeply felt religious experience. “Whoever cannot do this,” he continues, “is requested to read no farther; for it is not easy to discuss questions of religious psychology with one who can recollect the emotions of his adolescence, the discomforts of indigestion, or, say, social feelings, but cannot recall any intrinsically religious feelings.”¹¹ From a halakhic standpoint, such an ultimatum is ruled out by the

obligatory urgency of prayer. The elements of human experience presupposed by prayer must be accessible to the average human being. They cannot be limited to the inner world of the religious virtuoso.

The hallmark of R. Soloveitchik's work on prayer is his full commitment to the double challenge we have outlined. From below, as it were, he has demonstrated that the ladder of prayer can indeed be pitched where all ladders start, in the perennial occupations of the heart. Regarding prayer, as in other areas, R. Soloveitchik is not embarrassed by the fact that the ordinary believer comes to God with mixed motives.¹² Unlike the mystics, he champions a straightforward interpretation of petitionary prayer and its central place in *tefilla*. God has commanded us to request His help with respect to our mundane needs; there is no reason to salvage the ingredient of self-seeking in this by re-describing our entreaties as disguised moves in an occult metaphysical exercise whose true object is the *Shekhina* rather than the speaker.¹³ Against the blander apostles of spiritual uplift, he does not shy away from confronting human sinfulness, in all its ugliness, as a real setting in which the struggle for holiness takes place.

The building blocks of *tefilla*—praise, petition, gratitude—and the other components of the liturgy, correspond to universal human experiences. Consciousness of depth crises, which is important to the Rav's conception of petition, would seem to require special sensitivity, insofar as this type of crisis does not force itself upon the sufferer willy-nilly, as does a disease or famine, but requires some degree of reflective liveliness. Yet R. Soloveitchik believes that a consideration of boredom, shame, and other general human experiences, provides the needed awareness.¹⁴ No doubt he would endorse the second reason for understanding prayer as petition offered by Karl Barth (with whom the Rav also shares the emphasis on prayer as a commandment): "only in this way is there any safeguard that the real man comes before God in prayer."¹⁵

The other facet of the Rav's treatment of prayer consists of his elaboration of its halakhic structure and import. Halakha confirms and molds the subtlety and nuance of the prayerful life. Where the uninitiated turns the pages of the *Siddur*, indiscriminately wending his, or her, way from the beginning of the proceedings to the end, the halakha establishes a fixed, meaningful order. As we all know, the *Amida* is not a jumble of benedictions, but a sequence in which petition must be prefaced by praise and sealed with thanksgiving; the connection of the *Amida* with the preceding *Shema*, linking redemption and prayer, is likewise essential to the encounter prescribed by halakha.

R. Soloveitchik expanded and deepened such insights. Thus, for instance, *Pesukei de-Zimra* and *Hallel* are not merely two series of Psalms that play a part in different segments of weekday or festival worship. The former is essentially an act of scripture study, which consists in reading Psalms 145-150, inculcating a theological message about God the Creator that prepares the individual for the main part of the morning service. The latter is the fulfillment of the obligation to extol God on special occasions, which uses Psalms 113-118 as its text; the meaning of the act is praise and thanksgiving, not the fact that sections of scripture are being read. This fundamental difference is reflected in the different opening and closing benedictions for the two recitals and in other details.¹⁶ Or, to take another example, thanksgiving (*hoda'a*) appears in the *Amida* and in *Birkat ha-Mazon*. In the former, the benediction is accompanied by bowing; in the latter, bowing is inappropriate. Why? Because the expression of gratitude in the *Amida* takes place in the context of prayer, which entails submission to God, hence bowing. In *Birkat ha-Mazon* the context is one of thanksgiving after a satisfying meal. Both prayers thank God, but the nature of thanksgiving cannot be the same in two disparate frameworks.¹⁷

“Without intelligence, whence prayer?” Intelligence is the path to knowledge of oneself, thorough knowledge of the words and gestures in which one is engaged—without such knowledge, how can one fully discharge the duty of prayer, and how can one find in prayer the resources for spiritual growth? Even if the individual, or the group, luckily avoid major theological or halakhic error, one might as well speak of performing a piece of music that one hasn’t studied and rehearsed. One may discharge the halakhic obligation to pray, but the flavor of prayer will be missing, and a feeling of spiritual malaise and dissatisfaction is one consequence.

The last analogy reminds us that the knowledge of which we speak must be internalized. A student once asked me, regarding the Rav’s painstakingly described journey through the first three benedictions of the *Amida*, how anyone can actually concentrate on the hairpin turns of consciousness implicit in the text?¹⁸ Can one indeed shift from the unworthiness to pray expressed in the preamble to the confidence of *Avot*, to the sense of awe that dominates *Gevurot*, then to the synthesis of *Kedusha*, the various petitions, and the three blessings of thanksgiving that, according to the Rav, recapitulate, in reverse order, the themes of the opening three? No matter how slow the pace (and whistling past the opportunities for woolgathering that beset artificial prolongation) the task seems psychologically impossible. One cannot pray and stage-

manage multiple changes of mood at the same time. The only answer is that repetition and habituation must come to the aid of theological and halakhic understanding. The act of prayer must occupy the foreground of consciousness while the interpretation of prayer, in the background, provides the meaning. As R. Kook remarks more than once in discussing prayer, the sensitive and disciplined imagination, essential for living prayer, is grounded in familiarity and habit.

So far we have examined the kind of ongoing reflection on the human condition and on the liturgical text that usually makes its intellectual mark gradually, slowly seeping into the cracks of our consciousness and bodies until we are able to enact the halakhic distinctions and make the work of the liturgy our own. Sometimes intellectual insight, when it is achieved, is more sudden. So sudden, indeed, that in retrospect it seems too obvious to have required discovery. What we discover, in effect, is not a mystery about the institution of prayer, or about ourselves, but an elementary grammatical truth about the nature of prayer. In such cases we are liable to underestimate the intellectual nature of the insight. Let me illustrate with two examples:

1) Some years ago, I wrote an essay on petitionary prayer.¹⁹ My analysis was heavily influenced by R. Soloveitchik's view that prayer reflects man's attempt to learn his true needs. Yet, faithful to the Rav's outlook, I rejected a purely didactic theory of prayer, in which prayer is equated with self-analysis. A writer sympathetic with my aims and insights nevertheless imputed to my philosophizing a failure to avoid the didactic approach.²⁰ Having emphasized adequately, I thought, that the individual is not merely judging himself, but wants God to respond and to help the supplicant to attain his legitimate goals, I was initially unsure as to where I had opened myself to misunderstanding. Upon careful review I found that insufficient attention had been given to the formal act of petition. Honestly presenting one's situation to another person who is benevolent, and able to help, may come close to asking for help, and can certainly be interpreted as a broad hint that help is wanted. But, in grammatical terms, it is not quite a request. Both the text of prayer and the spirit of prayer demand of the individual that he, or she, explicitly address God in petition. If it takes the effort to write an article, and to digest a critique, to grasp this apparently simple point, then so be it.²¹

2) R. Hayyim Soloveichik's famous analysis of *kavvana* in prayer defines the act of prayer as awareness that one is "standing before the king," i.e., in the presence of God. The Hazon Ish, among other criti-

cisms, holds that such awareness is implicit in the very fact that an individual enters into the verbal behavior and gestures associated with halakhic prayer; any additional requirement is redundant.²² It would appear, then, that the consciousness of addressing God, and the conception of God accompanying our address, is so deeply embedded in the grammar of prayer as to render discussion superfluous. Whatever the case might have been when the Hazon Ish annotated his copy of R. Hayyim, many traditional Jews are both amazed and inspired when they encounter the following statement by R. Hayyim's grandson:

It is impossible to imagine prayer without, at the time, feeling the nearness and greatness of the Creator, His absolute justice, His fatherly concern with human affairs, His anger and wrath caused by unjust deeds. When we bow in prayer, we must experience His soothing hand and the infinite love and mercy for His creatures. We cling to Him as a living God, not as an idea, as abstract Being. We are in His company and are certain of His sympathy. There is, in prayer, an experience of emotions that can only be produced by direct contact with God.²³

III. AN EXAMPLE OF REFLECTION ON THE TEXT: ON HEALTH AND WEALTH

The victim of Rabbi Steinsaltz's disapproval, in our opening section, probably did not immerse himself in the intellectual quest outlined above, although, even if he did, he would still be vulnerable to criticism: the time for study is before, not during prayer. The kind of inquiry that can effectively be transferred to the post-cholent hour would more likely be a localized examination of the text, the extraction of assorted *diyyukim* and homiletical goodies from the lines of the *Siddur*. But the aimlessness of many such investigations and the sinking feeling we often experience when called upon to celebrate the results, or at least nod appreciatively, should not obscure the fact that meaning resides in the details, not only in structure and theme.

After all that R. Soloveitchik taught about the importance of petition in prayer, the supplicant must work his way through thirteen specific requests. Petition, on the Rav's understanding, pertains to our needs, about the true nature of which we are more or less deceived. The fixed order of prayer is the Torah's mode of educating us to a better comprehension of our true table of needs.²⁴ Ultimately, of course, the text itself cannot tell us what exactly our needs are with respect to

our various troubles; that is why we address our personal entreaty to God. Can the careful, word for word, examination of the text, in addition to the investigation of its general structure, yield some insight that will at least channel our thoughts in the right direction?

Let us examine two petitionary blessings: the prayer for health (*refa'enu*) and the prayer for prosperity (*barekh alenu*). Prayer for health flourishes today, not only in the privacy of the *Amida*, but in the spectacular boom in *Mi she-berakh's* and the popularity of public Psalm recitation. Most of the time we are praying for others, frequently for people in whose fate we have no selfish interest. No doubt we are all in need of material well being too, but our prayers in that direction seem less important in the overall scheme of our public spiritual existence. This, despite the fact that in days gone by, prayer for economic sustenance was a most prolific subject of petition, as witness the elective petitions inserted in our *Siddurim*. Popular culture portrays the sobbing ignoramus for whom all prayer, even the most abstruse hymn, boils down to one impassioned message: "*Ribbono shel Olam, give parnasa,*" while the most respectable and sophisticated frankly acknowledge the central place in prayer occupied by this need.²⁵ Why is it not so prominent in contemporary consciousness, even while prayer in time of illness flourishes?

One outstanding difference between threats to our health and other problems is that physical illness lends itself to objective definition: we know that something is wrong, and we count on others to understand and to empathize as best they can. Moreover, we are willing to communicate our suffering to others in the expectation, often met, that they will know how to respond. Thus we feel free to publicize our trouble, to ask for the *Mi she-berakh*. The same is true when we are threatened with poverty resulting from a drought or the collapse of demand for the goods we had labored to produce and had hoped to bring to market. Such was the typical experience of our ancestors. In the *parnasa* crises characteristic of our own situation, by contrast, when one is frustrated on the job or desolate in one's relations to others, the nature of the pain is harder to locate, and we are often reluctant to speak and find relief. In R. Soloveitchik's terms, illness manifests a surface crisis, whereas other difficulties belong to the realm of depth crisis. One might imagine that when standing before God, we need not bother with precise accounts of our condition: He knows it all. Nor need we feel inhibited before the Almighty. Nevertheless our social habits and confused self-knowledge seem to carry over into our private prayer as well. We will return to this phenomenon later on.

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Let us focus more narrowly, for the moment, on the petition for prosperity. To begin with, like our other requests, it is phrased in the plural: we pray for others, not for ourselves alone. But the language of the prayer is oddly muted, at least when looked at from a modern perspective. Our prayer is limited to “this year and its crop.” We beseech the Almighty to bless it “like the good years” (*ka-shanim ha-tovot*): good years; not optimal years. When we pray for health, the text does not place similar restrictions on the scope of our petition. In principle, one might pray for endless years of boundless health: nothing in the text discourages us from forming such an intention. The words of *barekh alenu*, by contrast, encourage us to set our sights lower.

Now the concrete prayer for health that is uttered by flesh and blood people need not request the optimum. When we, or those close to us, are ill, we often bargain with God. In the act of praying, we often discover what it is that we really want, and need, with respect to our bodily integrity and function. Take the diary kept by David Klinghoffer’s adoptive mother in her battle with the cancer that eventually killed her:

‘Dear God,’ she writes, ‘please help me survive this test!’

‘Help me, dear God, give me strength and let me rid myself of the cane. I need you, dearest God, please let me feel your love. Tonight depression again has filled my thoughts.’

‘How can I calm this turmoil inside me? Only God is my salvation.’²⁶

Mrs. Klinghoffer is far from being a religious virtuoso. Yet the record presented to us is a model of passion and proportion. The formulas of traditional Judaism, of which she was, in any event, not a regular practitioner, would not have denied her an unchecked hope for total recovery. Someone else in her situation might authentically have prayed for the maximum. The question before us is: can the same be said with regard to our desire for prosperity, for material success?

R. Kook touched upon this problem in a slightly different context. Discussing the appropriate blessings bestowed by a guest upon his host, he notes that these include a wish for the host’s exceeding success (*me’od*). The guest should not include himself in this particular request. In principle, wealth can be viewed as a means of greater service to God and the community; it is, therefore, a worthy benefit. In considering one’s own needs, however, “each person should take hold for himself of the middle character and should be concerned that great riches will cause him to deviate from the straight path.” Moreover, continues R. Kook, fortuitous, outsize success generally comes about through clever-

