

Three Approaches to Prayer

I. Prayer in the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

1. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, p. 2

When I speak about the philosophy of prayer or *Shema*, I do not claim universal validity for my conclusions. I am not lecturing on philosophy of prayer as such, but on prayer as understood, experienced, and enjoyed by an individual. I acquaint you with my own personal experience. Whether, taking into consideration the differences between minds and the peculiarities of the individual, my experience can be detached from my idiosyncrasies and transferred to others, I do not know.

2. *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 2:4

The great Rabbi Ḥiyya said: I never managed to pray with intent, but one time I made an effort to concentrate and I started to think and said to myself, who enters first before the king, the ἀρχαπέτης [Commander of the Palace] or the *Resh Galuta*? Samuel said: I counted chicks. Rabbi Abun bar Ḥiyya said: I counted stone rows. Rabbi Mattaniah said: I am thankful to my head that when I come to *Modim* it bends down by itself.

3. *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, IV:18

The reason which leads men to doubt the efficacy of prayer is the same as that which leads them to deny God's knowledge. Their argument is as follows: Either God has determined that a given person shall receive a given benefit, or He has not so determined. If He has determined, there is no need of prayer; and if He has not determined, how can prayer avail to change God's will that He should now determine to benefit the person, when He had not so determined before? For God does not change from a state of willing to a state of not willing, or vice versa. For this reason they say that right conduct is of no avail for receiving a good from God.

2. תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת ברכות משנה ב' הלכה ד'

אמר רבי חייא רובא אנא מן יומי לא כוונית אלא חד זמן בעי מכונא והרהרית בלבי ואמרית מאן עליל קומי מלקא קדמי ארקבסא או ריש גלותא. שמואל אמר אנא מנית אפרוחיא. רבי בון בר חייא אמר אנא מנית דמוסיא. אמר רבי מתניה אנא מחזק טיבו לראשי דכד הוה מטי מודים הוא כרע מגרמיה.

3. ספר העקרים מאמר ד', פרק י"ח

מה שהביא האנשים לפקפק בתפלה, קרוב למה שהביא אותם לסלק ידיעת השם. וזה שהם אומרים: שלא ימלט הדבר מחלוקה אם שנגזר מהשם טוב מה על איש מה או לא נגזר. ואם נגזר אין צריך תפלה, ואם לא נגזר איך תועיל התפלה לשנות רצון השם לגזור עליו טוב אחר שלא נגזר, שלא ישתנה השם מן הרצון אל לא רצון ולא מלא רצון אל רצון, ובעבור זה יאמרו שלא יועיל כשרון המעשה אל שיגיע לאדם מהשם בעבורו טוב מה.

I. PRAYER'S NOT-SO-CENTRALITY

4. *Shabbat* 10a

Rava saw Rav Hamnuna, who was prolonging his prayer. He said about him: They abandon eternal life [the study of Torah] and engage in temporal life [prayer]. And Rav Hamnuna held that the time for prayer is distinct and the time for Torah is distinct.

5. Rambam, *M.T., Laws of Prayer* 6:8

A person who is involved in the study of Torah when the time for prayer arrives must stop and pray. If the study of Torah is his full-time occupation and he does not work at all, and he is involved in the study of Torah at the time of prayer, he need not stop, since the commandment of the study of Torah is greater than the commandment of prayer.

6. *Megillah* 27a

And R. Pappi said in the name of Rava: to convert a synagogue into a *Beit Midrash* – permitted; to convert a *Beit Midrash* into a synagogue – prohibited.

7. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *Prayer in the Teachings of Rav Soloveitchik*

Those closest to him remember with admiration not only his brilliant lectures but also the broken heart filled with longing which characterized his stance as a servant of God standing before his Master during the *Ne'ila* prayer on Yom Kippur, and the ecstasy and power which burst forth during his recitation of *Nishmat Kol Hai* at the Seder table.

II. PERMISSION TO PRAY

8. *Berakhot* 31a

Rav Hamnuna said: How many significant *halakhot* can be derived from these verses of the prayer of Hannah? ... “So Eli thought her to be drunk,” from here we learn that a drunk person is forbidden to pray.

4. תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף י' עמוד א'

רבא תזניה לרב המנונא דקא מאריך בצלותיה. אמר: מניחין חיי עולם, ועוסקים בחיי שעה. והוא סבר זמן תפלה לחוד וזמן תורה לחוד.

5. משנה תורה לרמב"ם הלכות תפילה פרק ו' הלכה ח'

מי שהיה עוסק בתלמוד תורה והגיע זמן התפלה פוסק ומתפלל. ואם היתה תורתו אמנותו ואינו עושה מלאכה כלל והיה עוסק בתורה בשעת תפלתו אינו פוסק, שמצות תלמוד תורה גדולה ממצות תפלה.

6. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף כ"ז עמוד א'

ואמר רב פפי משמיה דרבא: מבי כנישתא לבי רבנו – שרי, מבי רבנו לבי כנישתא – אסיר.

8. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ל"א עמוד א'

אמר רב המנונא: כמה הלכתא גברוותא איכא למשמע מהני קראי דחנה. ... “ויחשבה עלי לשכרה” – מכאן ששכור אסור להתפלל.

9. Berakhot 25a

Rav Huna said: One whose garment was tied around his waist, [i.e., he was bare above the waist,] is permitted to recite *Shema*. ... [25b] But for the *Amidah*, one must cover one's heart.

9a. Rashi, Ibid. s.v. *aval litefillah*

It is necessary that he see himself as though he is stood before the King and stand in awe. But for *Shema* one is not speaking before the King.

10. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* pp. 149–150

Relating to God through speech and supplication appears to our sages as a brazen and adventurous activity. How can mortal man, who is today here and tomorrow in the grave, approach the supreme King, the Holy One blessed be He? Does an ordinary subject have the license to speak to a great and exalted King and petition him for his needs?

... If this is the case, what is the character of prayer? The whole substance of prayer as petition and supplication for man's petty needs, as we have indicated, is puzzling and beyond our ken. Can man attain a foothold within Divine transcendence? Can he shower Him with a plethora of insignificant matters?

11. Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, Positive Mitzvah* 5

That we are commanded to serve Him, which is expressed many times, ... the language of the *Sifrei* is "serve Him," this is prayer.

12. Berakhot 31a

I might have thought that one could pray as many times as he wishes throughout the entire day; it has already been articulated by Daniel, "And three times a day [he knelt upon his knees and prayed]" (Dan. 6:11).

9. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כ"ה עמוד א'

אמר רב הונא: היתה טליתו חגורה לו על מתניו – מותר לקרות קריאת שמע. ... [ע"ב] אבל לתפלה עד שיכסה את לבו.

9א. רש"י שם ד"ה "אבל לתפילה"

צריך הוא להראות את עצמו כעומד לפני המלך ולעמוד נאימה. אבל ק"ש אינו מדבר לפני המלך:

11. ספר המצות לרמב"ם מצות עשה ה'

הוא שצונו לעבדו, וכבר נכפל זה הצווי פעמים, ... ולשון ספרי "ולעבדו" זו תפלה.

12. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ל"א עמוד א'

יכול לתפיל אדם כל היום כולו – כפר מפורש על ידי דניאל: "וּמְנִין תִּלְתָּא וְגו'".

13. Berakhot 34a

Rav Yehuda said: One must never request his own needs in the first three or in the last three blessings; rather, he should do so in the middle blessings. As Rabbi Ḥanina said: During the first three blessings, he is like a servant who arranges praise before his master; during the middle blessings, he is like a servant who requests a reward from his master; during the final three blessings, one is like a servant who already received a reward from his master and is taking his leave and departing.

13. תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ל"ד עמוד א'

אמר רב יהודה: לעולם אל ישאל אדם צרכיו לא בשלש ראשונות, ולא בשלש אחרונות, אלא באמצעיות. דאמר רבי חנינא: ראשונות – דומה לעבד שמסדר שבה לפני רבו. אמצעיות – דומה לעבד שמבקש פרס מרבו. אחרונות – דומה לעבד שקבל פרס מרבו, ונפטר והולך לו.

14. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* pp. 173–174

Even though, as noted, prayer requires praise and thanksgiving, nonetheless the vigor and power of prayer derive from petition. Halakhah is interested in psychosomatic man, in his concrete corporeality. It is displeased by the ecstatic separation of soul from body during prayer. The aim of worship of the heart is the offering of sacrifice through total surrender of body and soul to God.

15. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” *Tradition* (Spring 1978) pp. 70–71

Yet there is another aspect to prayer: prayer is an act of giving away. Prayer means sacrifice, unrestricted offering of the whole self, the returning to God of body and soul, everything one possesses and cherishes. There is an altar in heaven upon which the archangel Michael offers the souls of the righteous. Thrice daily we petition God to accept our prayers, as well as the fires – the self-sacrifices of Israel – on that altar (“*ve- isbei Yisrael u-tefillatam be-abava tekabbel be-ratzon*”). Prayer is rooted in the idea that man belongs, not to himself, but that God claims man, and that His claim to man is not partial but total. God the Almighty, sometimes wills man to place himself, like Isaac of old, on the altar, to light the fire and to be consumed as a burnt offering.