

Prayer and Spirituality

Class 14

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1. "Prayer in the Teachings of Rav Soloveitchik zt"l," *Alei Etzion* 9 (2000), pp. 23-42 (taught 1996)

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 10a) teaches:

Rava observed Rav Hamnuna drawing out his prayer. He said, 'You are putting aside eternal life and involving yourself with momentary life!'

[Rashi explains: 'Eternal life' refers to Torah, whereas prayer focuses on the needs of our ephemeral physical life, such as healing, peace, food.]

And he [Rav Hamnuna] explained, 'Prayer has its time, and Torah study has its time.'

By virtue of his roots and influences, "the Rav" (as Rav Soloveitchik was known to his students) presumably belonged to the school of Rava. Obviously, as regards the *mitzvot* of *tefilla* (prayer) on the minimal halakhic level, the position of Rav Hamnuna – "Prayer has its time, and Torah study has its time" – was recognized in both Volozhin and Brisk. Halakha follows Rabbi Yochanan's opinion (*Shabbat* 11a) that Torah scholars' absolute exemption from prayer is limited to those, like Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, whose "Torah is their profession," i.e., those who devote all their time exclusively to Torah study...

in the tradition of Volozhin and Brisk the value and status of prayer – relative both to other areas of Divine service (especially in comparison to Torah study) and to the special status and importance of prayer in the popular view – were quite limited.

Volozhin and Brisk were guided by the central awareness that, in the words of the Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 6:8), "the *mitzva* of Torah study is greater than that of *tefilla*." In truth, the issue was never evaluated in these terms. *Tefilla* and Torah study were never placed on two arms of a scale with a view to comparing their respective weight. The attraction to Torah study and commitment to it were understood first and foremost on the valuational and existential levels. The obligation of conscientious study day and night, uninterrupted and unwavering, was emphasized over and over...

The dominant emphasis was placed on the acquisition of Torah through investing supreme effort in its study. There can be no doubt that this tradition regarding the relationship between Torah and *tefilla* left an indelible imprint on the Rav at the outset of his career, and had a determining influence on his way of life and also, to some extent, on his philosophy.

For a long time, at least until the end of the 1950's, the Rav would not hesitate to pray alone in order to make more time available for learning... Nevertheless, it is clear that prayer held a central place in the Rav's spiritual world.

At the start of his career as a Torah luminary, the Rav paid special attention to the issue of prayer – both between the walls of his own *beit midrash* as well as from various public podiums...

Alongside Torah study, *tefilla* represented a central and potent ingredient in the Rav's personality and his service of God. 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 Chai*" at the *Seder* table...

In its narrower sense, the word "*tefilla*" is used to refer specifically to the *Shemoneh Esrei*... we may highlight several central elements which the Rav focused on:

1. The primary emphasis on "*bakasha*" (petition, request)... Gemara (*Berakhot* 34a), "[During] the first [set of blessings in the *Shemoneh Esrei*,] one is compared to a servant who presents praise before his master; [during] the middle [blessings] he is compared to a servant who requests a favor from his master; and [in reciting] the last [blessings] he is likened to a servant who has received a favor from his master, and now takes his leave and departs." Here, too, the central element of the *tefilla* is perceived as residing in the dimension of request... This examination was carried out keeping other views in mind: mystical perspectives

which highlight at length the dimension of praise, and idealistic-philosophical perspectives which regard the status of "petition" with misgivings, and perceive it as an unacceptable egocentric...

2. Moreover, the Rav emphasized the view of *tefilla* as standing before the King. He referred not only to the outpouring of one's request, but also to the consciousness of the encounter itself... Rambam gives expression to this idea while addressing the issue of the "preparation of the body" for prayer (*Hilkhos Tefilla* 5:4): "And his heart should be turned upwards, AS THOUGH HE WERE STANDING IN HEAVEN."... The Rav, however, saw the halakhic conclusion as more than simply a result arising from the requirement of "excessive concentration" which would prevent someone who was drunk from praying properly. He perceived *tefilla* as an encounter characterized principally by the "standing before the King," presenting oneself before God, a direct appeal to Him expressed in the language of the *siddur* in the second person singular. This standing before the King gives rise to both obligations: the first – deep concentration, and the second – sobriety, which a drunk cannot fulfill... The Rav saw in this idea of encounter and dialogue (with consideration for the unique nature of both "the one who stands" praying and "the One before Whom he stands") the central dimension of *tefilla*.

3. At the same time, the Rav would frequently speak of an additional dimension of *tefilla* – one on which he focused extensively in his early years. As surprising as this may sound, the Rav used to address much attention to the problematic nature of *tefilla*: is it actually possible and feasible, permissible and appropriate, to pray?... The Rav developed his argument as to the problematic nature of the recital of "*shevach*" (praise). Perhaps the appropriate response should be silence, due to both our wonderment at God's greatness, as well as shame at our unworthiness?... According to the Rav, a person may indeed approach God and present his requests. Human beings who dwell in this physical world have all kinds of deficiencies, wants and aspirations, and as a result they sometimes choose to knock on the gates of Heaven, to break through the barricades, and to present themselves before God asking that He answer their requests. Would we dare act in this way before a king of flesh and blood? Would we shout, demand, request and plead? Where do we find such audacity? How do we allow ourselves such *chutzpa* in our relationship with God?

This led the Rav to speak at length of the necessity for the existence of "permission" (a "*mattir*") for *tefilla*, something that would serve as a license of sorts, and in this regard he pointed towards a number of *halakhot*... In this connection, the Rav used to quote the Gemara in *Berakhot* (31a) which poses the question, "Can a person pray the whole day long?" and answers, "No, for as we learn from the Book of Daniel (6:11): 'Their times are three.'" The very question is not whether a person is required to pray all day long, but rather whether he is even permitted to do so... The problem here lies not in our concern for the possibility of *berakha le-vatala* (reciting blessings – which contain God's name – unnecessarily), but rather in the very audacity of the idea of standing before God the entire day...

The second level... looks at prayer as representative of an entire category of *mitzvot*... the Rav saw *tefilla* – and the Divine service which it represents – as an example, perhaps the best and most outstanding example, of a certain type of *mitzva*... The Rav regarded it as plainly obvious that "Divine service of the heart" takes place in the heart. But, then, how do we explain the obligation to actually articulate the prayers verbally? And here he presents his answer: there is the "action of the *mitzva*," expressed in the recitation of the words (the reciting of a certain text with a certain structure, in a certain place and under certain conditions, according to all the details as they appear in the *Shulchan Arukh*), and there is the "fulfillment of the *mitzva*," which pertains to the essence of the individual, his experience of the importance of his stance before God and the significance of the message which he seeks to transmit to God...

The third level of investigation which we mentioned above forges the connection between prayer and other central philosophical and moral concerns in the Rav's thought... The Rav elaborated on his opposition to the ritualistic view, according to which the nature of a person's life creates a division between the world of worship and the sphere of general activity. In contrast, the Rav emphasized the integrative, holistic and comprehensive nature of Halakha... From a structural point of view, *tefilla* includes both individual and communal prayer. Hence, this subject presents a convenient arena for examination of both aspects: the

individual – the "lonely man of faith" who stands alone before the Almighty – and at the same time the person as a member of a wider community, "communal man," "national man," an integral part of *Knesset Yisrael*... The Rav tended to regard the balance between individual prayer and communal prayer as expressing two components of religious existence...

The Rav gave expression to this view in his emphasis on the fact that even though practically human sacrifice is forbidden, in principle the individual is actually required to sacrifice himself to God. He saw *tefilla* as a state of self-sacrifice by the individual:

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. ["Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," Tradition, Spring 1978, pp. 70-71]...

The Rav dwelt at length on man's dependence, a point which the Maharal saw as standing at the center of the concept of "Divine service." Man is utterly dependent, helpless. Should he become disconnected even for a moment from God, he would be unable to continue to exist...

In a *shiur* which he delivered before the Rabbinical Council in 1963, the Rav spoke of the famous dispute between Rambam and Ramban regarding prayer. According to the Rambam, the *mitzva* of daily *tefilla* is *de'oraita* (i.e., its source is to be found in the Torah). The Ramban, on the other hand, holds that the biblical source for prayer is limited to the obligation to pray in times of trouble (while daily prayer is mandated only rabbinically). The Rav's daring comment on this debate ran as follows: the Rambam fundamentally agrees with the Ramban. Indeed, *tefilla* is obligatory only "in times of trouble," but the Rambam perceives man as existing in a perpetual state of crisis. Were it not for God, he could not exist for a single moment, and there can be no greater trouble imaginable than a person who is, heaven forbid, disconnected from God. Hence, we may deduce that the individual is in a constant state of crisis and needs God's contact and His mercy every day. Here man appears to us as needy, weak, or – to use the imagery of "The Lonely Man of Faith" – Adam II.

2. "Law and Spirituality: Defining the Terms," in *Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law*, Adam Mintz and Lawrence Schiffman (Yeshiva University Press, 2005), pp. 3-33

Spirituality, as concept and reality, revolves around three distinct elements. In **one sense**, it denominates a kind – or, if you will, a level – of existence. In a primitive context, this might crudely refer to a physical essence, albeit more rarefied than gross carnal being. In a more sophisticated vein, it bears metaphysical import.¹ At the highest plane, it is of course identified with the *Ribbono shel Olam*. He is, Himself, pure spirit, " אין לו דמות הגוף ואין לו גוף " ("He has not semblance of a body nor is He corporeal")...

At a second, categorically inferior, plane, it denotes a plethora of immaterial entities, differently conceived in various cultural traditions. These, for us, may be angelic...or demonic... [b]ut whatever the moral state, the metaphysical state is purely spiritual...

At yet another plane, however, we encounter spirituality within the context of the physical. In a very limited sense, it has even been taken by some to include the animal world. The term, " רוח הבהמה " ("the spirit of the beast"), is of course familiar from the *pasuk* in *Kohelet*; and Nahmanides, in particular, took pains to stress the significance of this aspect as a spiritual category, and not merely as a reference to one of the four elements, in Aristotelian terms, or to a molecular entity, in modern usage. Maimonides had totally dissociated the human spirit from the animal, emphasizing that the terms, *נפש ורוח* ("soul and spirit"), have totally different referents with respect to both:

ואינה הנפש המצויה לכל נפש חיה שבה אוכל ושותה ומוליד ומרגיש ומהרהר אלא הדעה שהיא צורת הנפש ובצורת הנפש הכתוב מדבר בצלמנו כדמותנו ופעמים רבות תקרא זאת הצורה נפש ורוח ולפיכך צריך להזהר בשמות, שלא יטעה אדם בהן וכל שם ושם ילמד מענינו (יסוד"ת ד:ח).

Nor does it [i.e. the human "form"] refer to the vital principle in every animal by which it eats, drinks, reproduces, feels, and broods. It is the intellect which is the human soul's specific form. And to this specific form of the soul, the Scriptural phrase, "in our image, after our

likeness” alludes. This form is frequently called soul and spirit. One must therefore, in order to avoid mistakes, pay special attention to the meaning of these terms which, in each case, has to be ascertained from the context (Maimonides, Foundations of the Torah, 4:8)...

Nahmanides obviously assumed the uniqueness of the human spirit, singularly derived from divine aspiration – ויפה באפיו נשמת היים (“He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”); and it is upon man – in Browning’s phrase, “half angel and half dust, and all a passion and a wild desire” – that the conception of physically based metaphysical spirituality centers...

Within our own tradition no less than in that of religious humanism, in general, the themes of man’s dual origin and dual nature – whether dichotomized or integrated, in conflict or in harmony – are both common and central, almost to the point of being platitudinous; and, asserted or assumed, they seem to posit spirituality as the defining quality of human existence...

From spirituality as fact we move, **second**, to spirituality – here, purely human – as attitude and approach. We are, of course, all bound by physical limitations, impelled by instinctual drives, and constrained by socioeconomic needs...

They can succumb to the weakness of the flesh, the appetite for affluence, or the lust for power, or they may seek to transcend them. A spiritual life, in this sense, is one which seeks to maximize spiritual achievement and to advance the distinctly human aspect of personal and communal existence – of man as *zelem E-lohim*, “the human face divine;” of man as a moral and intellectual being, of man as a creative *ruah memallela* (“spirit which speaks”), capable of esthetic perception and expression... From a religious perspective, the priority of *hayyei olam* over *hayyei shaah* is a crucial aspect of the spiritual agenda.

Thirdly, spirituality denotes a mode of experience and activity, a quality of personality which finds expression not only in what is pursued, but how. In part, it relates to perception, to the degree of supra-materiality being ascribed to observed reality...

Primarily, however, at issue is sensibility and expression. A spiritual person is one who not only perceives reality as spiritual, but experiences it as such. He is one who relates himself and his situation to the world of pure spirit – transcendental, in religious terms, or cultural and/or national, secularly conceived; and who can give his sense of that relation a given cast. That cast encompasses a cluster of elements: ethereality, vitalism, dynamism, inwardness, feeling, personal expression, imagination. The emphasis is experiential and, hence, significantly subjective. Beyond the inner sense, and the inner voice, we may also note – and this factor has attained increased popularity in current parlance – the mode of its expression. What is intended is not necessarily verbalization but, rather, more physical means of rendering the spiritual – dance, song, vehicles of exuberance, passion, and enthusiasm...

Given this account of spirituality, we are confronted with the question of its relation to the halakhic linchpin of our religious world – and, hence, derivatively, of its relation to ourselves...

The fundamental affirmation of spirit, as fact and value, is central to traditional Jewish thought; and whatever controversies have flared over the degree of centrality – and they have been significant – have arisen within the parameters of clearly accepted spiritual priority.

If we have a problem, it obtains with respect to our third aspect – the spirituality of sensibility and expression. *Prima facie*, here, too, there is no conflict. We rightly regard the focus upon inwardness as endemic to any meaningful religion, and it was clearly and succinctly articulated by *Hazal*: רחמנא ליבא בעי (“The Merciful One desires the heart”).⁷ Further, the purification envisioned in the familiar midrash as the *telos* of *mizvot*, לא ניתנו המצוות אלא כדי לצרף את הבריות (“The precepts were given only that man might be refined by them”), is unquestionably spiritual. Beyond this, we can also heartily espouse the spirituality of exuberance...

[Maimonides] concludes *Hilkhot Lulav* with a ringing affirmation regarding the performance of *mizvot* in general:

השמחה שישמח אדם בעשיית המצוה ובאהבת הא-ל שצוה בהן עבודה גדולה היא וכל המונע עצמו משמחה זו ראוי להפריע ממנו שנאמר תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' א-לקיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב וכל המגיס דעתו וחולק כבוד לעצמו ומתכבד בעיניו במקומות אלו חוטא ושוטה ועל זה הזהיר שלמה ואמר אל תתהדר לפני מלך וכל המשפיל עצמו

ומקל גופו במקומות אלו הוא הגדול המכובד העובד מאהבה וכן דוד מלך ישראל אמר ונקלותי עוד מזאת והייתי שפל בעיני ואין הגדולה והכבוד אלא לשמוח לפני ה' שנאמר והמלך דוד מפזז ומכרכר לפני ה' וגו' (לולב ה:טו).

Rejoicing in the fulfillment of a commandment and in love for God who had prescribed the commandment is a supreme act of divine worship. One who refrains from participation in such rejoicing deserves to be punished, as it is written, “Because you did not serve the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart” (Deut. 28:47). If one is arrogant and stands on his own dignity and thinks only of self-aggrandizement on such occasions, he is both a sinner and a fool. It was this that Solomon had in mind when he uttered the words, “Glorify not thyself in the presence of the King, (Prov. 25:6).” Contrariwise, one who humbles and makes light of himself on such occasions, achieves greatness and honor, for he serves the Lord out of sheer love. This is the sentiment expressed by David, king of Israel, when he said, “And I will be yet more vile than this, and will be base in mine own sight (Sam. ii 6:22).” True greatness and honor are achieved only by rejoicing before the Lord, as it is said, “King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, etc. (Sam. ii 6:16)” (Laws of Lulav 8:15)...

And yet we do have a problem – one which, moreover, we ignore at our peril. It may perhaps best be delineated by noting elements frequently regarded as opposed to spirituality. The spiritual is often contrasted with the material, the formal, and the intellectual¹¹ – all three being viewed as relatively external when compared to, in Hamlet’s phrase, “that within which passeth show.” Yet all three figure prominently within the halakhic order. Even pietists who trumpet the priority of *hovot ha-levavot* acknowledge the critical role of *hovot ha-eivarim*. Technical *shiurim* abound in numerous areas... And, finally, the central, almost anomalous, place assigned to *Talmud Torah* hardly requires evidential prooftexts. The potential for attenuated spirituality clearly exists, then.

Our adversaries have, of course, gone further, contending that this potential has indeed been realized. From non-Jewish and from Jewish sources, the charge has been leveled since, at least, the dawn of Christianity. The critique of Pharisaism touched upon duplicity and insincerity, but at its heart – in the Pauline version, particularly – lay the broadside attack upon legalism and the juxtaposition of letter and spirit... In the modern period, this criticism has been particularly honed by existentialists... [the conception that] programmed religion inevitably stultifies spirituality...

Our concern, however, is... with what we say to the *Ribbono shel Olam* or to ourselves. For the antinomy is real and the tension immanent. Apart from the material, formal, and intellectual factors already cited, other divisive elements might be mentioned. As Maimonides noted, law is formulated with reference to the public; spirituality, by contrast, is highly personal. In a related vein, law is, by definition, normative, and, hence, objective, while the spiritual is presumably subjective, and more contextually oriented. Above all, while *halakhah* may be perceived as constraint – it establishes a floor for the religious life and both provides a basis and points a direction for progress towards the attainment of values, moral and religious – it may also be seen as imposing a ceiling; as clipping the wings of soaring aspiration... Given the dichotomy, our message and our challenge is clear.

We shall abandon neither the normative nor the experiential pole. On the one hand, as committed Jews, we have neither the right nor the desire to reject *halakhah*... it is the fountainhead of collective *Yahadut*... It is, equally, the linchpin of personal *avodat Hashem*... A Jew certainly experiences the *Ribbono shel Olam* as Creator and Redeemer, ה' צורי וגואלי; but, first and foremost, he encounters Him as ultimate Commander, before whom he stands in servile bondage; with respect to whom, בטל רצונך מפני רצונו (“Nullify your will before His will”) is the *alpha* and *omega* of religious existence...

On the other hand, we dare not, and we may not, forgo spirituality, as either value or mode. Its significance is dual. First, it ennobles and purifies human personality, as such, a quality to be admired even irrespective of specifically religious ramifications... Second, it brings a person closer to the *Ribbono shel Olam* – and, hence, to His service. As a religiously oriented individual enhances his spirituality, he becomes increasingly sensitized to the presence of *shekhinah*; and we recall that a constant sense of that presence, שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד,

("I place God before me constantly"), was posited by the Rama, in the very opening codicil of *Shulkhan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, as an overarching principle of religious existence...

What is needed, clearly, is balance; and it is that which, within the parameters of tradition, has been sought. As might have been anticipated, *a priori*, it has historically been variously formulated, within different movements or cultures and by different masters; and, at times, there has been alternation, with the pendulum, swinging between relative pietism and legalism...

What we need, however, is more than balance, with its connotation of respective checks and equilibrium. We need mutual, genuinely reciprocal, fructification. On the one hand, the spiritual is to inform and enrich the material and the intellectual... First, we have to develop our own selves as spiritual beings. To the extent that we are sensitive, generally, we shall enhance the capacity for being sensitive, religiously. Shallowness and aridity in one area leave their mark along the whole front. Secondly, we can harness specific halakhic categories.

Quantitativeness is, as the Rav stressed, an intrinsic feature of halakhic existence...in a concern for *shiurim*, proper units of time and space; and, in part, in awareness of the number and/or duration of *mizvah* performances. This aspect is fundamentally highly positive... However, it needs to be counterbalanced, on purely halakhic grounds, by the qualitative dimension, by awareness of not only how much we do or how many *shittot* we consider, but of how we do, as regards both the motivation and the character of performance...

the qualities of *ahavah* and *yirah*, normatively obligatory at all times, should, if woven into the fabric of a halakhic performance, enrich its substance...

Nahmanides held that the Torah itself had assigned a specific *mizvah* to the task of qualitative enhancement... "The essential meaning of the Scriptural phrase, "to serve Him with all your heart," is the positive commandment that every one of our acts of divine service be performed absolutely wholeheartedly, i.e., with the necessary full intent to perform it for the sake of His name..."

In this connection, it is important to emphasize that the contribution of spirituality to our service of God is not confined, *ad hoc*, to moments of *mizvah* performance. It pervades our entire existence – as persons, generally, and as religious beings, specifically...

This realization is the basis of our standing before our Master...acknowledgement of the fact that spirituality, as a quality of soul, is likely to bring even the average person closer to the *Ribbono shel Olam* can and ought to be widespread. Conversely, *halakhah* enriches spirituality; and this, in at least two major respects. First, its prescribed forms and technicalities, while undoubtedly constraining, and meant to constrain, in one sense, are liberating in another. With respect to many *mizvot* mandated procedure frees the individual from groping for means to flesh out a ritual initiative, and enables him to pour all of his spiritual energies into the religious experience proper.

As a case in point, we may briefly examine prayer... [and relatedly] Maimonides' formulation that uniformity in *berakhot* was instituted in order that:

שיהיו ערוכות בפי הכל וילמדו אותן ותהיה תפלת אלו העלגים תפלה שלימה כתפלת בעלי הלשון הצחה (תפלה
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an orderly form would be in everyone's mouth, so that all should learn the standardized prayer, and thus the prayer of those who were not expert in speech would be as perfect as that of those who had command of a chaste style (Laws of Prayer 1:4)...

How much spiritual energy would be wasted every *seder* night, if one had to improvise the evening's structure and content, even if it were done in advance? How much distraction from the experiential substance of *yom teruah* would ensue if we had to invent anew the texts and themes of the day's prayers and *teki'ot* every Rosh Hashanah? The *halakhah* has entitled us by confronting us with the existent and demanding that we cope with its challenges.

Secondly, however, the contribution of *halakhah* to spirituality...consists, primarily, in a positive and substantive vein, in bonding ourselves to its Author, in deepening and intensifying our relation to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. Encounter with Him and His will in every area, almost at every step; attention riveted

upon understanding and implementing His directives; awareness of His pervasive presence in all walks of life; the constant challenge to free, and yet obedient, decision – all of these impact significantly upon our religious being and upon our link to *shekhinah*. That link, in turn, impacts profoundly upon our total spiritual life. Admittedly, however, while this interactive reciprocal fructification exists at the general plane, its realization at the personal level requires some effort. The key is an awareness, in-depth awareness, of one critical point... that we do not just encounter a codex but a vivifying presence; that vitalism and dynamism derive from clinging to our Commander and Legislator – ואתם הדבקים בה' א-לקיכם חיים כלכם היום (“You who cleave to God your Lord, you are all living today”);... and that, consequently, divine law and human spirituality can interact positively within our own selves...

Of course, recognition of the uniqueness of *halakhah* as *devar Hashem* does not necessarily assure the strain of interactive balance I would encourage...

The Rav *zt"l* was keenly – and, at times, painfully – aware of this problem. The awareness is already very much in evidence in *Ish ha-Halakhah*...

Is halakhic man devoid of the splendor of that raging and tempestuous sacred, religious experience that so typifies the ecstatic *homo religiosus*? ... Is it possible for halakhic man to achieve such emotional exaltation that all his thought and senses ache and pine for the living God?...

Halakhic man is worthy and fit to devote himself to a majestic religious experience in all its uniqueness, with all its delicate shades and hues. However, for him such a powerful, exalted experience only follows upon cognition, only occurs after he has acquired knowledge of the *a priori*, ideal halakhah and its reflected image in the real world. But since this experience occurs after rigorous criticism and profound penetrating reflection, it is that much more intensive.

Educationally, however, this sequential approach seems neither feasible nor desirable. It is, at best, suited for only an elite coterie...

We need... to be no less sensitive to... the dangers posed by a bent for spirituality upon full Torah commitment. These dangers are multiple. First, there is the possibility that a thirst for the spiritual will issue in disdain for what is perceived to be nonspiritual. The latter might be “pure” *Talmud Torah*, dismissed either out of anti-intellectualism, or out of passionate moral and religious fervor...

Or it might be rote and shallow performance of *mizvot*. The outcry against *mizvat anashim melumadah* has, of course, been the staple of pietists and moralists throughout the generations; and, in the modern era, it has united the *mussar* movement and *Hasidut*. However, its impact may be a two-edged sword. At the personal level, it may inspire more spiritual observance; or, it may, contrarily, lead one to abandon observance entirely, inasmuch as technical performance is deemed meaningless anyway. And, at the interpersonal plane, it may lead to demeaning the ordinary Jew, routinely but tepidly enacting his halakhic commitment...

A second danger, already noted *en passant*, pertains to attitudes toward the material... Where the focus upon spiritual essence is exaggerated, the danger of minimizing material halakhic status increases. This is of particular relevance with respect to the land of Yisrael. One recalls the stir raised here a decade ago by remarks attributed to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, that while *olotekha u-shelemutekha* could only be offered in the *beit ha-mikdash*, *aliyotekha u-shelemutekha* could be attained universally.

Somewhat akin to this factor, lurks a third danger. [Spirituality’s] creative and dynamic aspect may exert a centrifugal thrust, issuing in alternative modes of religious experience and expression which, if insufficiently integrated, may rival normative categories. Secondly, the spiritual impulse may be adulterated, religion becoming tinged with superstition or vestigial magic, spirituality degenerating into spiritualism or its equivalent.

Finally, alongside the religious, there looms a moral danger. Excessive spirituality, possibly tinged by otherworldliness, may lead to averting one’s gaze from mere material suffering... the lesson of Rav Yoḥanan’s familiar observation (מגילה לא.) (“Wherever

you find the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, there you find His humility” [BT *Megillah* 31a]), can be all too easily lost. And inordinate spirituality may accelerate that loss.

I regard none of this as cause for discarding spirituality. It remains an indispensable component of the religious life.

I regard none of this as cause for discarding spirituality. It remains an indispensable component of the religious life. These are, however, reasons for nurturing and honing it carefully; and, together with the caveats against arid legalism, constitute an overriding challenge for optimal personal realization in the quest for integrated *avodat Hashem*. If we had to decide between pallid normative observance and non-halakhic spiritual dynamism we would, as commanded beings, unhesitatingly, albeit regretfully, opt for the former. But does anyone imagine that the Ribono shel Olam confronts us with such a cruel choice? Our aim, duty and aspiration both, is the conjunction of spiritualized halakhah and disciplined spirituality; the fusion which enables us to realize the poetry and prose of ideal Jewish existence...

The topic of this paper, as well as of this conference, is, in every sense, timeless. Yet it bears, additionally, a clear immediate relevance, in light of the recent upsurge in spirituality within the Western world, generally, and our own Jewish sector, particularly... In conclusion, I should presumably address myself – with specific reference to the Jewish scene – to the current scene somewhat...

The most palpable manifestation of this movement, in public perception, is exuberance and enthusiasm – particularly, within the context of prayer. Songfests, midnight dancing, Carlebach *kabbalat Shabbat* – these are among the hallmarks. In seeking to assess this development, I am convinced that, on the whole, its effect has been salutary – especially in the lay community. The verve and the excitement felt by many in the course of more visibly “soul”-oriented *tefillah* stand in marked contrast to the pallor and desiccation which characterized many *batei kneset* a decade ago...

[I] spoke before about a passionate concern for Torah. The key, indeed, is the passion – passion which is important in its own right as a component of *avodat Hashem*, and passion which holds the key to the development of other components... In order to attain that, we, as educators, should be ready to sacrifice – and even sacrifice considerably – a measure of objective intellectual accomplishment...”...

There are, however, several reservations – some, major. First, as regards the perception of spirituality... However, we must beware of conditioning our definition or conception of spirituality upon enthusiasm and its external expression... Is Byron more spiritual than Wordsworth – the Wordsworth who defined poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility;” he who taught us to approve “the depth and not the tumult of the soul;” he who could attest, in concluding the “Ode on the Intimation of Immortality,” “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears?”...

Second, the question of the balance of innovation and tradition needs to be carefully considered. I am not certain as to whether or how far the Rama’s dictum, *ואל ישנה אדם ממנהג העיר אפילו בניגונים או בפיוטים שאומרים* (“A person should not deviate from the local custom – even in the matter of the particular tunes or liturgical poems that are traditionally recited there [*Orah Hayyim* 619:1]”) applies to ordinary daily or Shabbat prayer...

The more critical concerns lie, however, beyond the purview of the practical aspects of conduct in the *beit ha-kneset*, and touch upon major cruces, especially as they impinge upon the *dati le-umi* Torah community. By way of example, in one of the more “spiritual” *yeshivot hesder*, the assembled *zibbur* burst into dance in the midst of *tefillat Yom Kippur*. It was subsequently explained that – and the rationale is even more perturbing than the event – inasmuch as they dance on *Simhat Torah*, why differentiate. Clearly, whoever can offer such a rationale has no idea of the genuine import of *Yom Kippur* – and probably also has no idea of the import of *Simhat Torah*... In this instance, not the halakhic calendar but personal inclination dictated the day’s mood...

Even more seriously, misguided spirituality distorts *Talmud Torah*. In another yeshiva, students are encouraged to adopt, as do their masters, quasi-mystical interpretations for apparent halakhic discussions in the *gemara*. And this, in the name of a presumably spiritual quest for *penimiyut ha-Torah*... But those of us who were trained to deal with halakhic *realia* in their own terms, are chagrined by the harnessing of

misconceived spirituality, in order, literally, לגלות פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה (“to produce an interpretation of Torah that is contrary to *halakhah*”). Most serious, however, are the dangers which lurk in a relatively abstract realm. Religious spirituality expresses itself, primarily, in two areas. The first, at which we have already glanced, is that of forms of worship and modes of expression. The second is focus upon the nature and degree of adhesion and linkage to the transcendental order, in general, and to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, in particular. In its more extreme form, this tendency is reflected in various mystical traditions,...

Per se, the aspiration for linkage is of course positive, provided that awareness of the absolute chasm separating man from his Creator is not jaded. Where the sense of the “wholly other” is eroded, the striving for fusion can become highly dangerous, even more so from a Jewish perspective than from a Christian one. The Gaon’s critique of the *Tanya*, in this respect, is familiar;... The natural bent of spirituality in religion very often expresses itself, however, precisely in diminishing the sense of chasm and engendering a feeling of familiarity...

[Rav Kook’s] personality and his writings have left an indelible imprint upon that community, and reinvigorated spirituality is surely part of his patrimony, as it was central to his life and works; and for this we are all in his debt. Some would contend that he is also, unwittingly, responsible for some of the excesses... Be this as it may, it is essential that we grasp the seriousness of this issue.

We are not just dealing with some moot theological abstraction. At issue is the character of man’s relation to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. Much of what now passes for spirituality implicitly presses for the demotion of *yirah* in the interest of *ahavah*... the place of *yirah* as a cardinal aspect of our normative religious life is beyond question. It constituted the central motif of *maamad har Sinai*; in *Hazal*, religious commitment is generally denominated *yirat shamayim*...

I’m afraid, however, that votaries of current spirituality often tend to erode the status of *yirah*; and, together with it, the status of the very essence of *Yahadut: kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim* and *kabbalat ol mizvot*... To take a published example, what is one to make of the following affirmation by Rav Shagar, regarded as bearing affinity to current spiritual circles:

האמונה בהלכה, כמו גם אמונת חכמים בהקשר זה, אינה נובעת בהכרח מכך שיש לי הוכחה שהם היו החכמים הכי חכמים. מקורה בסוג של אינטימיות – התורה והיהדות זה אני! הבחירה שלי בעצמי היא בחירה בתורה, במסורת. לא לחנם הביעו חכמים במדרשים רבים את אהבתם לתורה במטפורות הלקוחות מחיי איש ואשתו. הכרה זו, שבפי הז"ל נקראת קבלת עול מלכות שמים נותנת את האופציה למגע עם האיך־סוף, בהיותה מוחלטת וראשונית.

Belief in the *halakhah*, like the belief in the Sages in this connection, does not necessarily derive from being sure that these sages were the wisest. Rather, its source is a kind of intimacy: Torah and Judaism – this is I! My choice of myself is the choice of Torah, of tradition. Not for nought did the Sages, in so many *midrashim*, express their love of Torah through the metaphor of conjugal life. This realization – which the sages term “the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven” – affords the possibility of contact with the Infinite, in that it is absolute and primal.

And to think that this exercise in narcissism is to be equated with *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*!...

Still more worrisome – hopefully atypical, but still a chilling straw in the wind – I found a conversation to which I was recently privy. Towards the end of a wedding of a *hatan* from a markedly spiritual yeshiva...

I overheard one of his peers confidently reassure another:

בעצם, אתה לא צריך לקנא בא-לקים, מפני שאתה הוא. רק החלק שבנו שעושה רע איננו א-לקים; אשר לכל השאר, אתה הוא.

Actually, you don’t have to envy God, because *you are He*. Only the part of us that does evil is not God. As for the rest, you are He!...

I was confronted by the obvious question: Was there any connection between the gusto and the blasphemy, no less grievous for being innocent?...

The benefits of the current wave of spirituality are many and diverse; and, if such matters can be quantified, I repeat that, on balance, they outweigh the reverses even within our own Orthodox camp. However, some of

its manifestations – particularly, ideological flotsam and jetsam – are truly worrisome; and with these we need to cope.

We are confronted, then, with significant difficulties. The benefits of the current wave of spirituality are many and diverse; and, if such matters can be quantified, I repeat that, on balance, they outweigh the reverses even within our own Orthodox camp. However, some of its manifestations – particularly, ideological flotsam and jetsam – are truly worrisome; and with these we need to cope. This brings us, finally, back to our primary problem: How to attain optimal fusion of divine law and human spirituality, committed to both while eschewing neither. We live by the serene faith that it can be done. We refuse to believe that we are doomed to choose between arid formalism and unbridled sensibility. We reject both Leibowitz and Buber.

3. “Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting,” *By His Light* (2003), pp. 220-252; VBM

Centrist Orthodoxy finds itself increasingly under attack. While the possibility of attack from both right and left is endemic to centrism by virtue of its dual exposure, the nature and extent of criticism varies. At present, I believe, particularly insofar as the Right is concerned, it is perceived by attackers and defenders alike as being particularly intensive, broad in scope, covering a wide range of thought and activity, and penetrating in depth. It consists not just of carping criticism, sniping with regard to one feature or another, but rather of a radical critique, questioning the fundamental legitimacy and validity of the basic Centrist position.

This phenomenon, the so-called “shift to the right,” is, in certain respects, general. The crisis of faith and experience engendered by the spiritual vacuity of modernism has resulted in the polarization of the Western world, and has ushered in the growth of hedonistic individualism, on the one hand, and largely authoritarian spiritualism, on the other. Within the religious world, again broadly speaking, this development has been accompanied by the quest for the rock-ribbed certainty of purism and a concomitant rejection of what many perceive to be the middling and muddling compromises of centrism.

The popularity and bellicosity of Christian fundamentalist political organizations, for instance, would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Islamic fundamentalism, to take another example, has spread like wildfire in countries once deemed by largely secular historians to be inexorably on the road to religious modernization. At another level, as many Jews in the United States particularly and lamentably have learned, cults have become the craze of many who have found no other egress from this spiritual desert...

We must maintain our positions not only with a passionate conviction, but also with spirituality. This, I grant you, is an amorphous quality, and some people do not quite know what to make of it. It is even, particularly in *Eretz Yisrael*, regarded within our community with a great deal of suspicion. When you say someone is an *ish ru'ach*, a man of spirit, immediately people begin to raise an eyebrow—presumably he is a leftist, a poet, a bohemian artist or maybe a professor, but surely not one of “our people.” However, in *Tanakh* it is Yehoshua who is described as an “*ish asher ru'ach bo*, a man possessed of spirit” (*Bemidbar* 27:18)—and he was the person who carried the mantle of Moshe *Rabbeinu*!

As amorphous and, perhaps, ambiguous as this quality may be, it is a central category. Admittedly, it can be divorced from our particular commitment. R. Soloveitchik was once visited by Alain de Rothschild, a man totally removed from the world of Torah and *mitzvot*. Afterwards, I asked R. Soloveitchik, “How did you find him?” R. Soloveitchik said, “You know, he’s a spiritual person.” And it meant something to R. Soloveitchik. Here, then, is another quality which we sometimes lack. Perhaps a Centrist position, with its openness to the world and its multiple engagements, is inherently prone to this danger. The lack of spirituality, however, is very widespread on the Right as well. There is often an excessive focus on wealth and externals even among *benei Torah*; sometimes when they get together, they sound like stockbrokers. In all communities, therefore, there is room for a *cheshbon ha-nefesh*.