THE THOUGHT OF JOSEPH DOV SOLOVEITCHIK
A THEOLOGICAL SOURCE FOR CONTEMPORARY JEWISH SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

By

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Theology of the University of St. Michael’s College and the Department of Theology of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theology awarded by the University of St. Michael’s College

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ABSTRACT

The transformations of the 19th century modern era had a large impact on religious life as rationalism and enlightenment could not sustain the soul. The Westernized Jew faced a predicament leaving behind traditional Jewish values to acculturate to a secular lifestyle. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik responded to this dilemma by presenting a Judaism that was God centred, rooted in traditional Jewish values and expressed in contemporary terms. My thesis will illustrate how Soloveitchik’s theology of suffering and prayer and his appreciation for the longings of the human heart have laid a foundation for contemporary Jewish practice in spiritual direction and meditation.
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INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE OF THE THESIS

In the past few years, I have been privileged to learn and teach in the areas of Jewish healing, Jewish spiritual direction and Jewish meditation. I have facilitated healing groups for the Toronto Jewish Healing Project with various rabbis in the community. As well, I trained as a Jewish Spiritual Director with Morei Derekh, a programme in the United States for lay leaders and rabbis inspired by Christian practice and theology. Currently, I teach Jewish meditation and Jewish spiritual direction in the community, helping those burdened with illness, loss and despair to connect with Jewish teachings.

Ultimately, this pastoral work has led me to further academic study to intensify my understanding of the relationship between theology and pastoral practice. I am deeply moved by the assertions and truths, both academic and practical, that I have been privileged to study. At the same time, I feel a tremendous obligation and responsibility to play my part in transforming Jewish life through pastoral action. Faith allows for change, hope and a positive outlook. As a result of my varying experiences of study, service and spiritual practice, I have sought to deepen my Jewish theological and spiritual pursuits by integrating relevant Jewish texts and practice with the formal study of theology by pursuing a Master of Arts in Theology.

In this thesis, I intend to explore the traditional theology of Joseph Dov Soloveitchik to ground my understanding of contemporary practices in Jewish spiritual direction and Jewish meditation. My purpose, therefore, is to show that Soloveitchik’s
theological approach and his “clarity, his knowledge of the human condition, his existential openness and loneliness”\textsuperscript{1} is compelling in modern times to a liberal, Jewish woman as well as to a modern, liberal Jewish community in search of relevant spiritual practice. In order to situate my study, I will first briefly set forth some timelines of the life and works of Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Then, I will describe in more detail the purpose and procedure of my thesis.

**B. INTRODUCING JOSEPH DOV SOLOVEITCHIK**

Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was arguably one of the most significant rabbinic figures of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The teacher, literally the Rav, for many admiring and grateful students, easily influenced more rabbis than any other in recent times. According to John Moscowitz, Senior Rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple Toronto, no one in the Jewish religious world so articulated the persuasive ideas of the tradition as did Soloveitchik.\textsuperscript{2} Soloveitchik, with unusual depth and wisdom, proposed a theology “for those seeking a mediation between classic halakhic[legal] Judaism and Western modernity...he understood the necessity of a traditional theology [which] interacts with and confronts the challenges of the modern world.”\textsuperscript{3}

Rabbi Joseph Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik was born in Pruzhana, Belarus on February 27, 1903 into a family of eminent Eastern European rabbis. His father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik (1879-1941), was the scion of a Lithuanian rabbinical dynasty that traced its roots back to Rabbi Chaim Volozhin (1749-1821), the leading disciple of the

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\textsuperscript{1} http://rabbijohnmoscowitz.blog.com (accessed December 16, 2010).
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.
Vilna Gaon, Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman Kramer (1720-1797), foremost leader of non-Hasidic Jewry of the past few centuries, and one of the most influential rabbinic authorities since the Middle Ages. Soloveitchik’s paternal grandfather was Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik (1853-1918), widely known as Rabbi Chaim Brisker because he served as the rabbi of Brisk (Brest- Litovsk). Rabbi Chaim radically changed Talmudic study with his introduction of what became known as the “Brisker method,” an approach characterized by its insistence on incisive analysis, exact classification, critical independence and emphasis on Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah as the focal point of rabbinic research. Soloveitchik’s mother was Pesia Feinstein (1880-1967), the daughter of Rabbi Elijah Feinstein (1842-1928), descendant of the Maharal and Rashi (leading medieval, rabbinic scholars and commentators on the Torah) and the spiritual leader of Pruzhana.

The young Joseph Soloveitchik spent his formative years in Khaslavichy, Belorussia. This community consisted of a large number of Lubavitcher Hasidim. Soloveitchik was greatly influenced by a gifted Lubavitcher teacher at the local heder (Hebrew school) and he learned more about the Tanya, the classic Habad text of Hasidic thought, philosophy and theology, than about the Talmud which was more focussed on the laws, ethics, customs and history of the Torah. While studying with his father, the young Soloveitchik developed innovative approaches to explain difficult Talmudic and


* Rakeffet-Rothkoff, Professor of Rabbinic Literature at Yeshiva University’s Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Institute, Jerusalem spent four years studying under Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Rakefet-Rothkoff quotes Soloveitchik’s legal and rabbinic views in hundreds of hours of recorded lectures which have been invaluable for my understanding of the seminary world in which Soloveitchik lived and taught and as a window into the religious world view of Soloveitchik, the man. Rakefet-Rothkoff, “Teachings on the Rav,” http://www.yutorah.org (accessed on 5 July, 2010).
Maimonidean passages. During this period, he did not engage in formal secular studies; however, he acquired a lifelong taste for language and literature from his mother who guided him in reading fairy tales, the classics and the poetry of Nachman Bialik.

In 1920, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik left Russia, in haste presumably due to the pogroms, and escaped to Warsaw, Poland. In 1924, the young Soloveitchik entered the Free Polish University where he studied political science. He then sought to broaden his secular university education in 1926 by studying Neo-Kantian philosophy at the University of Berlin. He received a doctorate in 1932 for his dissertation on the epistemology and metaphysics of Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), a German Jewish philosopher and one of the founders of Neo-Kantianism. In Berlin he sought out other devotees and interpreters of Torah Judaism, such as Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn who eventually became the head of the Lubavitch Hasidim in 1950. Soloveitchik’s hasidic learning remained with him in years to come; the spiritual teachings of hasidism certainly had an influence on his intellectual thought.

In 1931, Soloveitchik married Tonya Lewit (1904-1967) who came from a similar background. Lewit was raised in Vilna and she sought a Western European education at University of Jena, Germany where she received a Ph.D. in education. In 1932, Soloveitchik, his wife, Tonya and their first born immigrated to the United States. Given the foreboding circumstances for Jews in Europe at the time, Soloveitchik’s parents had already arrived in the United States. His father had become head of the Talmudic faculty of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in Manhattan in 1929. Under the Immigration Act of 1924, any person who had been a “minister of any religious denomination, or professor of a college, academy, seminary or university,” was permitted
to enter the United States “solely for the purpose of continuing this vocation.” The seminary facilitated the immigration of Joseph Dov Soloveitchik and his immediate family, but it could not afford to employ him. Instead, a few months after his arrival in Boston, Soloveitchik was invited to become rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of Boston, Massachusetts. His main responsibilities were to provide spiritual leadership for the community and to deliver lectures in the various synagogues which made up the Union. Soloveitchik and his family made Boston their home for the rest of their life. Soloveitchik’s main achievements in Boston were in the area of halakhically based Jewish education.

In 1935, he journeyed to Palestine where he was a candidate for the post of Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Tel Aviv. Many considered him too young for the post and he was not selected. He was, however, a stalwart member of the Mizrachi movement, a Zionist organization committed to the establishment of the State of Israel. In a talk at the annual conference of the American Mizrachi-Hapoel Hamizrachi, mid-1950’s Soloveitchik explained why he had abandoned the Agudath Israel movement in favour of the Mizrachi movement, which was concerned with building the future of halakhic education in the Land of Israel, whereas Agudath Israel was primarily focussed on the continuity of Jewish life in its current East European centres. Soloveitchik took a lot of criticism for this switch and his stance on religious Zionism. However, the Holocaust had convinced Soloveitchik that the Mizrachi position, with Zionism as its main concern was correct. Halakhic Judaism and the Zionist movement remained priorities on his agenda.

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5 Ibid., 29
Soloveitchik’s identification with religious Zionism struck a responsive chord among his disciples, many of whom immigrated to live in the State of Israel.6

Following his return to Boston, he became more active in his rabbinical activities within the greater Boston Orthodox community. In 1937, he founded the Maimonides School, the first Jewish day school in the New England area. Soloveitchik was ultimately the spiritual mentor of the majority of the American trained Orthodox pulpit rabbis. He had a major influence over the Rabbinical Council of America formed in 1953. He also served as the spiritual leader of Congregation Moriya on the Upper West Side of Manhattan from 1950-1960.

Although he played an active role in the community at large, Soloveitchik’s main sphere of activity remained in the classroom and the lecture halls, which overflowed with students as he was a teacher *par excellence*. Even though he was reluctant to publish, many volumes of his writings, discourses and manuscripts, which had been edited from copious notes taken by his students, soon appeared under his name. On May 13, 1941 Joseph Dov Soloveitchik became his father’s successor and head of Yeshiva University in New York City for the next forty four years. Eventually, due to illness, he withdrew into seclusion until his death on April 8th, 1993. He was interred in the Jewish cemetery in Roxbury, Massachusetts next to his beloved wife, Tonya Lewit.7

Soloveitchik’s background was unique in its combination of the legal rigour and discipline of an Eastern European *Yeshiva* (religious seminary) upbringing with a secular, philosophical Berlin education. His forced emigration from Europe and his abrupt immersion as a leader and teacher of westernized *halakhic* Jewry in America added to his

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6 Ibid., 54-55
7 Ibid., 21-37
distinctive character. Although he loved America, he was never totally at home in the milieu of American Orthodox Judaism. He felt that it was deficient in a deep emotional foundation and in his view, “Modern Orthodoxy [lacked] the wings to soar to the heavens and [was] bereft of roots to truly penetrate the depth of religious experience.”

Soloveitchik’s unusual life, it would seem, had a profound impact on his theology and teachings, in particular on the depth of his understanding of the human condition which remains relevant to this day.

C. METHODOLOGY AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

In order to achieve my goal, I will focus on Soloveitchik’s primary works: *Halakhic Man; The Lonely Man of Faith; Fate and Destiny: From Holocaust to the State of Israel; Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships; Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer;* and *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition.* His teachings are characterized by a mixture of intellectual exposition and personal narrative both of which are productive for my endeavour. I will utilize both styles of writing in my analysis and interpretation of his work. I will also rely on key commentators on the writings of Soloveitchik to help enlighten the primary texts and descriptions of Soloveitchik’s theology to reveal the depth of his principal themes and personal theology.

I will investigate the significance of the traditional teachings of Soloveitchik’s theology as expressed through the themes of suffering, redemption and prayer.

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Examining Soloveitchik’s core writings, I will identify, analyse and interpret these themes which I deem to be most operative in the contemporary Jewish practices of spiritual direction and meditation. Chapter One will address Soloveitchik’s theology of suffering and redemption in relation to the Halakhah (Jewish Law), the dialectical nature of the Halakhah and Soloveitchik’s intimate descriptions of his own sufferings. Chapter Two will engage in a discussion of Soloveitchik’s intellectual theology and personal thought on prayer as the root of the covenantal relationship between human beings and God. In Chapter Three, the last section of the thesis, I will discuss the contemporary Jewish practices of spiritual direction and meditation, elucidating on these practices in order to ground them in Soloveitchik’s traditional teachings.

D. THESIS STATEMENT

Through my Christian and Jewish studies of theology and from my own experience in studying, teaching and practising Jewish spirituality, I have come to see the essential connection between theology and pastoral practice. Moreover, I understand how traditional Jewish theology is a solid base for contemporary Jewish practices of spiritual direction and meditation. Soloveitchik’s recognition of the significance of God’s presence in the life of every human being substantiates a contemporary Jewish spirituality in which the yearning for God and the acknowledgement of God’s role in one’s life is of utmost importance. Soloveitchik was deeply concerned with the human condition, and with the innate disquiet and loneliness of the human being who seeks
inwardness and longs for companionship with God in his or her desire for peace. In addition Soloveitchik’s personal narratives and private revelations about lived Jewish experience illustrate his profound understanding of the spiritual nature of the human being. His deep appreciation for the inexplicable longings of the human heart often transcends a tradition bound by law and ritual and thus serves as a meaningful foundation for contemporary spiritual practice.

CHAPTER ONE

SOLOVEITCHIK’S THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING AND REDEMPTION

Everyone suffers, whether it is a surface crisis such as a natural disaster, illness, poverty, or war, or a depth crisis such as the unknown, unidentified, hidden distress within that stems from the most crucial encounter of a human being as a spiritual personality. Crisis belongs to the very existential experience of all; no-one can escape the inner feeling of anguish. Central to Jewish thought is the obligation that suffering places on the human being. Judaism encourages one not to disengage from involvement in this depth crisis, but rather to deepen one’s involvement and confront the crisis courageously and intelligently through observance and practice. For today’s Jewish spiritual practitioner as well as for Soloveitchik who was writing and teaching during very different times, suffering is not about inquiring of the hidden ways of God, but rather what is the path a person shall walk when suffering strikes. Suffering is not about cause or purpose, but rather about how it can be mended and elevated. In The Lonely Man of Faith Soloveitchik writes,

“Theory is not my concern at the moment. I want instead to focus attention on a human-life situation in which the man* of faith as an individual concrete being, with his cares and hopes, concerns and needs, joys and sad moments, is entangled. Therefore, whatever I am going to say here has been derived not from philosophical dialects, abstract speculation, or detached impersonal reflections, but from actual situations and experiences with which I have been confronted. Instead of talking theology...I would like, hesitatingly and haltingly, to confide in you and share with you some concerns which weigh

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10 Soloveitchik, Out of the Whirlwind, 162-164.
11 Ibid.
12 *Please note that in his writings Soloveitchik uses “man” as the universal. In my use of his writings, I will cite him exactly, but I am aware of this exclusive use of language, and will keep the body of my work gender inclusive.
heavily on my mind and which frequently assume the proportions of an awareness of crisis...

The role of the man of faith, whose religious experience is fraught with inner conflicts and incongruities, who oscillates between ecstasy in God’s companionship and despair when he feels abandoned by God, and who is torn asunder by the heightened contrast between self-appreciation and abnegation, has been a difficult one since the times of Abraham and Moses...

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

The nature of the dilemma can be stated in a three-word sentence. I am lonely....I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and thrust away by everybody...I despair because I am lonely, and hence feel frustrated. On the other hand, I also feel invigorated because this very experience of loneliness presses everything in me into the service of God...to paraphrase Plotinus’s apothegm about prayer, this service to which I, a lonely and solitary individual, am committed is wanted and gracefully accepted by God in His transcendental loneliness and numinous solitude.”

The obligation to face one’s suffering, to confess, and to address the loneliness directly speaks profoundly to all those who reach out to God in the midst of their anguish, and become aware that even in the depths of despair all is not lost; God is always available and present in the reality of this concrete world. According to the tradition the human being must struggle with the despairs in this world and not flee from them. One may plead and yearn for God to dwell in the harsh realities of this world, and God must therefore descend to the human being; the human being does not ascend to God. For Soloveitchik, this is truly the experience of the halakhic (Jewish Law abiding) personality. He states,

“When his soul yearns for God he immerses himself in reality, plunges, with his entire being, into the very midst of concrete existence, and petitions God to descend upon the

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mountain and to dwell within our reality, with all its laws and principles. *Homo religious* ascends to God; God, however, descends to *halakhic* man. The latter desires not to transform finitude into infinity, but rather infinity into finitude. He brings down …holiness into a world situated within the realms of concrete reality…Transcendence becomes embodied in man’s deeds, deeds that are shaped by lawful physical order of which man is a part.”

This first chapter will attempt to clarify Soloveitchik’s personal understanding of the human condition and the obligation it imposes on the individual as grounded in the traditional theology of suffering and redemption. I will unfold this theme by discussing Soloveitchik’s thought on suffering and the *Halakhah*, the way he relates suffering and redemption, and his testimony to his own personal suffering.

**A. SOLOVEITCHIK ON SUFFERING AND THE HALAKHAH (JEWISH LAW)**

In an unfriendly world where disorder, disharmony, and despair exist at the very core of the human condition, how does Judaism accommodate pathos and suffering? “What must the sufferer do so that he may live through his suffering?” In Soloveitchik’s view the therapeutic and redemptive qualities for the person in crisis must be found in the spoken word and most of all in the *Halakhah*. However, like the sufferer today, he questions if this path is possible. He asks,

“Can such a metaphysic bring solace and comfort to modern man who finds himself in crisis... Is there in the transcendent and universal message a potential of remedial energy to be utilized by the rabbi who comes like Zofar, Bildad and Eliphaz, the three friends of Job, to share the burden and to comfort his congregant in distress?”

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Job’s friends were not successful in convincing him about the non-existence of suffering. Can the rabbi or spiritual director today be more effective? Even Soloveitchik does not have a definitive answer. Yet, ultimately Job’s suffering does lead to moral elevation. This moral obligation to do something with one’s suffering is central to Judaism and to Soloveitchik’s theology. Existential loneliness and suffering, according to Soloveitchik, is found in the interpenetration of seclusion and faith. This is the nature of the human dilemma; a dilemma that cannot be solved but that can be understood through moral commitment to self and to God. In fact, “One who repents must not only strive to do mitzvot (commandments), but he must literally pine for Hashem [God].” Yet this God that one longs for in one’s anguish often appears to be absent, and that too is very real and religion must respond to this absence. Soloveitchik understands this predicament well and he answers,

“The human bond to God is expressed in aspiration…In man’s yearning and frustration, God is revealed…It can only be that God draws man to Him. Man is tired and weary, dissatisfied with his life and his achievements; he is confused and lost in the paths of existence and cannot attain what he wants most…This “something” gives him no rest; it stimulates his nerves, attracting him with enormous power. What is the nature of the search? It is nothing but a search for God… The world was created not in order to humiliate and pain man, but … that He could reveal Himself to humans and become intimate with them…finite man and the Infinite seek but cannot find each other… Who can redeem him from his loneliness if not the God Who is hiding from him?”

17 Soloveitchik, The Lonely Man of Faith, 3-7.
Similar anxieties and aspirations of modern human beings are described in the Bible, particularly in the biblical accounts of creation. As a result every person must attempt to see him or herself in the biblical accounts. Human beings were told that they cannot live without a moral imperative, the *Halakhah*, which represents God’s will; one who ignores the command and eats from the tree of good and evil, is simply living to gratify his or her every desire; one who is humble and abides by the *Halakhah* recognizes the inner nobility, his or her individuality, and the covenant between God and the human being through elevation of him or herself by disciplined action.\(^\text{20}\)

According to Soloveitchik, the *Halakhah* operates on two dialectically opposed levels: topical *Halakhah* and thematic *Halakhah*. On the one hand, the *Halakhah* sets up a reasoned, clearly defined, precise system of thought, deeds, and actions which are normative. On the other hand the *Halakhah* insists on an all out unreasoned order of experiential themes communicated through metaphors which are felt intuitively, but cannot necessarily be interpreted.\(^\text{21}\) For example, the Sabbath is a twenty four stretch during which one must abstain from work and discontinue one’s daily routine: “Keep it holy, *le-kaddesho*...thou shalt do no manner of work” (Ex. 20: 8-10). This formal, topical approach to the Sabbath, to keep it holy(*le-kaddesho*), simply means to abstain from work. When one shifts from *halakhic* thinking to *halakhic* feeling, from topic to theme, the motto and text with regard to the Sabbath is Genesis 2:3: “And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, (*ve-yekaddesh oto*),” one now finds oneself in a new dimension, that of *kedusha* (holiness). The Sabbath is transformed from an abstract norm into a living entity, from a compulsory discipline to a spontaneous living experience.

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This twenty-four hour period becomes a metaphysical entity upon which God has bestowed a unique endowment of blessedness and sanctity.\footnote{Ibid., 89-90}

According to Soloveitchik, the themes of the *Halakhah* were never meant to be articulated and verbalized; they inhabit a mute, non-talkative boundary of concepts and ideas for which the *halakhic* person reaches out in his or her search for security. Yet these laws always remain outside one’s reach.\footnote{Ibid., 88} Basically, the *Halakhah* is concerned with one problem, the relationship of a human being to the existential order that confronts him or her. Exodus 24:7 states, “Na’aseh ve’nishma (we shall do and we shall listen).” It is not enough to do; it is also important and essential to understand and to know. It is not a scientific and intellectual cognitive gesture to behold the law; instead it speaks to the *homo absconditus*, the clandestine human being, the spiritual personality who is concerned with relating to and confronting God intuitively.\footnote{Ibid.} The *Halakhah* cannot be interpreted, understood, and analyzed; it must be felt intuitively.

Soloveitchik taught that religion is not simply a functional technology; it is concerned with the welfare of the human being which is one’s happiness, one’s peace of mind, and one’s tranquility. Although the *Halakhah* is theocentric, it is also concerned with human interests. An individual’s self-fulfillment and self-realization are relevant to the *Halakhah*. God linked God self to human beings through God’s laws, statutes, and judgements, and therefore the person who lives according to *Halakhah* in the “realization of the ideal”\footnote{Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 71.} is recognized as worthy of standing before God. As a result the human being never enters the world in darkness and despair, or chaos and fear because one may
“calm the turbulence of his soul” by throwing oneself with all one’s heart and mind into study of God’s laws. The Halakhah, in essence, is not at all concerned with a transcendent world, but rather,

“The task of the religious individual is bound up with the performance of commandments, and this performance is confined to this world, to physical, concrete reality, to clamorous, tumultuous life, pulsating with exhuberance and strength... Holiness means the holiness of earthly, here-and-now life.”

God did not hand over God’s Torah to ministering angels; God handed it to Moses who brought it down to earth to dwell among the people “who reside in darkness and deep gloom” (Ps.107:10). In other words, human beings bring God down into this reality rather than transcending upwards to the heavens, “A lowly world is elevated through the Halakhah to the level of the divine world.”

In The Lonely Man of Faith Soloveitchik distinguishes between Adam I and Adam II, the dual and contradictory natures of the human being. Indeed, Soloveitchik admits that the practical role of the human being within modern society is a very difficult and paradoxical one. Soloveitchik saw himself as a torn soul in crisis, straddling life in the tension of the gap that could not be bridged between faith and modern society. The human being is lonely because he or she is a person of faith, and that is the essence of a religious being. It is Adam II who asks the essential questions of God, such as what are the challenges that confront and torment a person from the depths of his or her soul? Who is deus revelatus and deus absconditus? God’s concealment or tzimtzum (contraction) as the mystics refer to it does not negate the...
existence of the human being. In fact *halakhic* man declares that it is not about the concealing of God’s face but rather about God revealing God’s glory. Adam II lives in close union with God and discovers God along many tortuous paths of creation. Unlike Adam I who is never lonely and who has Eve as his partner, Adam II does not explore the world from a scientific abstract fascination to advance and control the environment, but rather establishes an intimate relation with God, his companion. He is fascinated by the qualitative world - every beam of light, morning breeze, and blossoming land - God breathes life into Adam II. Adam II is a lonely individual who can only redeem his life in the depths of his private personality, in crisis and in failure, and in the self discipline of allowing himself to establish an intimate relationship with God as he spans the delicate balance between faith and modernity. His nature is to retreat and serve rather than to subdue.  

Like Adam I however, the modern human being is scientifically minded and tries to combat suffering; he or she remains stoic, disowning unpleasant emotions and convinced that suffering can be overcome with psychological mental health techniques, technology, and medical intervention, even though one is not always triumphant. There is a major distinction between the modern, psychological approach to suffering and the *halakhic* approach. The *halakhic* personality must accept suffering and turn it into a greater existential and a more fulfilling experience. “He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe off the tears from all faces” (Isa. 25:8). Even in the face of great suffering and evil Jews have always found relief, hope, and courage; the history of the Jewish people is a miraculous tale of suffering and martyrdom.  

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exist and the human being must face it in its perplexity. Judaism distinguishes between evil and suffering; suffering introduces the ideas of the transcendent and the universal whereby individual sufferings are raised to a higher good, “Suffering is the whirlwind out of which God addressed Himself to Job.”\footnote{Ibid., 128}

Topical Halakhah did not accommodate suffering and evil; it neither justified evil and suffering nor denied and hid it, but as a realistic framework it does not have a place for evil and suffering in its system. Topical Halakhah treats suffering very differently from thematic Halakhah. Thematic Halakhah as described above extends into infinity and eternity and accommodates evil and suffering, assigning it a prominent role and position that creates the opportunity for the highest good, rather than blaming suffering on an outside force of evil like Satan. As it is written in the Talmud, “…the Holy One brings suffering upon the righteous in this world in order that they may inherit the future world…” (Kiddushin, 40b).\footnote{Ibid., 95-97} When one who has retreated into oneself realise that he or she stands before God, and no-one else is beside one, it is at once disturbing and edifying, “A lonely being meeting the loneliest Being in utter seclusion is a traumatic but also a great experience.”\footnote{Ibid., 134} One’s loneliness becomes more coherent and one’s suffering more bearable.

This traditional but heartfelt theology of suffering is helpful to modern human beings who, like Soloveitchik, are constantly struggling to fill the gap between faith and modernity. Everyone suffers and it is profoundly uplifting to learn and to understand that one’s anguish may in fact draw one closer to God. When a person recognizes that in the
darkest moments the burden one carries is not his or hers alone, there is hope and even the possibility of healing.

B. THE DIALECTICAL APPROACH OF THE HALAKHAH AND CATHARSIS

“Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket... “I will not let you go unless you bless me”’’ (Gen. 32: 25-28).

When Jacob engaged with the mysterious antagonist on a dark night, a weak, powerless, and unarmed Jacob acted heroically, if not absurdly, by taking on the unknown enemy and surrendering rather than attacking. He acted contrary and impractically to all considerations; he refused to yield to force. What Jacob manifested was gevurah (heroism) which is always employed when reason despairs and logic retreats. There are situations in life when logical and utilitarian approaches fail to help one cope and one must leap into the absurd (a Kierkegaardian phrase) which may save a person when one finds oneself in utter distress.\(^{35}\) Although suffering exists, one must never acquiesce to it but try to subdue and fight it. However, at the most exalted moment of triumph God wants the human being to retreat and forgo the ecstasy of victory. The Halakhah insists on this dialectical approach of surging forward and retreating humbly, the ability both to control and to subdue.

For Soloveitchik, this type of gevurah is the existential experience of the lonely and suffering individual, which of course is the “absurd struggle of the story of the Jewish people’s survival for thousands of years.”\(^{36}\) This bold act distinguishes the human being from the beast who simply relies on brute koach (strength) rather than the ability to


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 41
surrender and admit defeat. The impossible and the absurd triumph over the possible and logical; heroism not logic wins the day.\textsuperscript{37} Jacob acted in this way; by freeing the defeated enemy he defeated himself. This defeat or surrender is what God wants from the human being to fulfill his or her self worth. This dialectical movement, no matter how incomprehensible to modern human beings, forms the very heart of halakhic living. The \textit{Halakhah} teaches one how to conquer and how to lose, how to seize initiative and how to renounce, how to succeed and how to invite defeat, and how to resume the striving for victory.\textsuperscript{38} Soloveitchik calls this heroism a “kind of divine dialectical discipline.”\textsuperscript{39} This concept is one of catharsis and purgation, a purification of the human being which is an indispensable condition of redemption. It is that which provides a meaningful existence. The human being learns to control his or her own inner life of feelings and emotions no matter how disruptive.

Human beings were never created perfect; contradiction is inherent in the very core of one’s personality. The human being must look at him or herself critically and admit failure and defeat. The courage to confess, to plead guilty, to accept defeat is the greatest of all virtues and the most heroic act. To recite \textit{teshuvah} (repentance) is the greatest act of \textit{gevurah}. God put at one’s disposal the powerful means of the intellect and the capacity to control nature, and therefore one must bear distress and accept suffering courageously and with dignity. To experience God in the deep recesses of one’s existential awareness is a unique gift which God bestowed upon human beings, created in the image of the Divine, in which human distinctness as a spiritual being manifests itself. This God-human relationship lies at the root of Judaism, and at the root of every civilized faith, including

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 39
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 44
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 45
today’s seeker who is searching for a profound spiritual relationship. To know that such a relationship is grounded in the tradition as outlined above is deeply comforting. Finding God is not scientific; the quest for God and the experience of confronting God gives one security and serenity as well as power and self-greatness. This divine, dignified character is dialectic in nature, “Whither shall I go from Thy spirit, O God? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?” (Ps.139:7). Surging forward and falling backward is a way of life ordained by God for the Jew.  

This leap from great sorrow to joy is heroic and redeeming because it is performed with humility and in the hush of the dark night of loneliness. In periods of death and mourning, for example, a sacred festival cancels the mourning period for intimate relatives of the deceased. As Soloveitchik notes,

“The Halakhah, which at times can be very tender, understanding, and accommodating, may, on other occasions, act like a disciplinarian demanding obedience. The Halakhah suggests to man, broken in body and spirit, carrying the burden of an absurd existence, that he change his mood, that he cast off his grief and choose joy... Is such a metamorphosis of the state of mind of an individual possible? Can one make the leap from utter bleak desolation and hopelessness into joyous trust? Can one replace the experience of monstrosity with the feeling of highest meaningfulness? I have no right to judge. However, I know of people who attempted to perform this greatest of all miracles.”

The Halakhah tolerates torturing thoughts, doubts about death, and the thoughts of the mourner since, “Those long periods of black despair contain the cathartic element which

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40 Soloveitchik, Out of the Whirlwind, 108.
cleanses and redeems the religious life.”

In recounting his grandfather’s fear of death, Soloveitchik writes,

“...he would throw himself into the study of the laws of tents and corpse defilement... and these laws...would calm the turbulence of his soul and would imbue it with a spirit of joy and gladness...the act of the objectification triumphs over the subjective terror of death.”

Many of the laws of death and mourning exempt the mourner from the obligatory deeds, like the daily praying of the *Shema* (Hear O’ Israel...) and putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries). These exemptions are rooted in the majesty and sanctity before God. As well, the *Halakhah* maintains that the human being is in control of his or her emotions, and once the bleak despair of death and mourning is over, one must pick up the debris of one’s shattered life to restore one’s dignity. One is encouraged by means of the various laws to move from self negation to self affirmation. There can be no dignity without the responsibility of commitments. It is a cognitive catharsis that consists in discovering the rapture, the terror, and the awe of the eternal mystery which grows with one’s commitment to knowledge. Catharsis is the spark of divinity within the human being.

For the modern seeker to maintain his or her dignity in the face of suffering and tragedy, he or she too, must ground him or herself in the knowledge of the tradition and deepen his or her connection and commitment to God through learning and through the discipline of ritual and the spiritual practices. If one does not redeem one’s religious life through understanding and self-control, one becomes selfish and arrogant, and infinitely distant from God. Only after Moses lost everything he was questing for, with the

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42 Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), 53
breaking of the tablets, did he ascend Mt. Sinai to receive two new tablets of stone and the radiant countenance and great mission of transmission to the covenantal community.

Soloveitchik had great difficulty with the angst of the modern human being. He believed that the modern person is attuned only to success and conquest, but does not want to see oneself as defeated. Therefore, when one encounters suffering and it overwhelms one, one cannot take it nor understand it. However, if on a daily basis one learns to surrender, to take defeat at one’s own hands in small matters, then when faced with bigger adversity and crises one will manage one’s challenges with dignity. In today’s world one is faced with many such challenges, and according to Soloveitchik it is the discipline of the *Halakhah* that teaches restraint, forbearance, surrender, and transformation; study of the *Halakhah* is redemptive and cathartic.

C. REDEMPTION, SUFFERING, AND SIN

Soloveitchik also teaches that because the human being is suffering and lonely, he or she is in need of redemption, and that *teshuvah* is at the heart of suffering since suffering precipitates a spiritual crisis in the depths of one’s being. In other words, suffering imposes an obligation to return to God in complete and wholehearted repentance:

> “Afflictions are designed to bestir us to repent, and what is repentance if not man’s self-renewal and his supernal redemption? Woe unto the man whose suffering has not precipitated a spiritual crisis in the depths of his being, whose soul remains frozen and lacking forgiveness! Woe unto the sufferer if his heart is not inflamed by the fires of affliction, if his pangs do not kindle the lamp of the Lord that is within him!”

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45 Ibid: 15-18
46 Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny*, 9-11.
The tradition is clear that the sufferer commits a grave sin if he or she allows his or her troubles to go to waste and remain without meaning and purpose.

“Suffering occurs in the world in order to contribute something to man, in order that atonement be made for him from corruption, vulgarity, superficiality, and depravity. From out of its midst the sufferer must arise ennobled and refined, clean and pure... from out of the very midst of agony itself he will attain eternal salvation. The agony itself will serve to form and shape his character so he will, thereby, reach a level of exaltedness not possible in a world bereft of suffering”

According to Soloveitchik, the responsibility of the human being in the world today is to transform one’s fate into destiny through the act of creation, renewal, and free will. If one only lives in a state of fate, one denies the existence of suffering and one lives in a state of disillusionment. The person of destiny is realistic and does not deny that suffering and evil exist in the world, but his or her approach is an ethico-halakhic one.

Judaism deepens the concept by combining the notion of mending and elevation of suffering with mending and elevation of divine hesed (loving kindness and loyalty). God’s acts of hesed are not granted freely; they impose restrictions and obligations, as it states in the Talmud, “A man must pronounce a blessing over evil just as he pronounces a blessing over good” (Berakhot 9:5). This requirement is meaningful as it empowers the individual sufferer with the hope that he or she may reach out to God in the midst of his or her anguish, and know that God is always present.

Judaism attaches great importance to free will, to reason, and to the intellect in order to create a life of meaning and joy, and to transform solitude and isolation into self

47 Ibid., 8
48 Ibid., 6
49 Ibid., 9-10
worth. Just as historically the Jews raised themselves up from a people to a holy nation, the individual must raise him or herself through relationship with another and in covenant with God. The *Torah* directs one to this end.\(^{50}\) Indeed, it lessens the burden of suffering to know that not only is one never alone, but that God commands one to return to God in an act of renewal and transformation, the ultimate act of redemption. “Judaism teaches the doctrine of repentance, whereby the sufferer is granted forgiveness and the chance to build his or her life on a higher spiritual plane. This is the act of loving kindness on the part of God, who seeks not man’s punishment but his rehabilitation.”\(^{51}\) Repentance allows one to renew one’s soul, not to obliterate the suffering or evil, but to make a clean start and to rectify and elevate the soul by enhancing one’s longing for holiness in order to come closer to God. It says in the *Talmud*, “Great is *teshuvah* for it allows one to approach the Heavenly throne” (*Yoma* 86a).\(^{52}\)

In the Sabbath liturgy it says, “Turn us towards You, Adonai our God, and we shall return. Renew our days as of old” (Lam. 5:21). The concept of *teshuvah* as a turning inward, a turning to, a turning back to a higher spiritual plane, brings one to a much deeper and higher understanding of self in relation to God and to others; ultimately, suffering like sinning brings one to the truth of one’s essence in God. *Teshuvah*, according to Adin Steinsaltz is,

“a return to God, or to Judaism, in the inclusive sense of embracing in faith, thought and deed…a return to one’s own paradigm, to the prototype of the Jewish person…to the soul structure of the individual Jew…It has been said

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 74

http://books.google.com/books/about/Reflections_of_the_Rav.html

\(^{52}\) Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*, 135.
that a man’s path of spiritual development, whether he has sinned or not, is in a certain sense a path of repentance. It is an endeavour to break away from the past and reach a higher level….the starting point of repentance is the point at which a person turns himself about, away from the pursuit of what he craves, and confronts his desire to approach God; this is the moment of conversion, the crucial moment of repentance.”

Also as an integral part of the act of teshuvah, Soloveitchik distinguishes a prior stage to the “recognition of sin” as the “feeling of sin,” which is similar to the feeling of an encroaching illness. Sin, like illness, was a concept employed by medieval Jewish philosophers and hinted at in the Bible, “Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all they diseases (Ps.103:3).” According to Soloveitchik, sins constitute a kind of spiritual pathology, whose outcome is the disintegration of the whole personality. As in a physical disease, the cells and tissues cease to function normally, so it is in the spiritual disease of sin. Sometimes one attempts to erase or deny the pain or the illness because of overt or covert fear, but denial does not diminish the importance of the illness and if one takes immediate notice and begins to treat the illness it is possible that a cure may be found. Similarly, when one commits a sin he or she is not only in violation of a precept, but also violates one’s own personality; one loses inspiration and ultimately one removes oneself from the presence of God.

At first one may fail to grasp the tragedy of the situation just as one may fail at first to grasp the tragedy of the death of a loved one. Similarly in the spiritual realm, when God departs from human beings in the wake of his or her sins, the mourning of the sinner like the mourning over a loved one may come late; but it must come and nothing

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can hold it back when it comes. The estrangement, the alienation, the emptiness, the fear, the dread, and the loneliness of this loss clutches at the soul. The helplessness and victimization expressed by Adam and Eve who sin and blame one another for their iniquities clearly illustrates their suffering and distancing from God. Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden is the beginning of the separation and the longing of every human being who pines for the reunification with God. While yearnings for the dead may be a fantasy, longings for God are real, and as long as one does not forget one’s sin or blot out one’s sufferings one may elevate oneself to raise the sin or the suffering to new heights.

Soloveitchik taught that contemporary human beings are aware of their many needs, but unaware of their worthwhile needs, and as a result of a person’s inability to recognize and understand oneself and one’s needs, one loses oneself by identifying with the wrong image. Because of this misidentification, one responds to the pressure of immediate gratification of certain needs, not knowing whose needs these really are. It is at this juncture, says Soloveitchik, that sin is born. Sin is born out of one’s own mistaken identity of self and one’s misuse of freedom. This confusion about one’s true needs is typical of all human beings without the distinction of life experience. From personal experience Soloveitchik adds,

“Let me speak for myself: I know that I am perplexed that my fears are irrational, incoherent. At times I am given over to panic; I am afraid of death. At other times I am horrified by the thought of becoming God forbid, incapacitated during my lifetime. One of my greatest fears is related to the observance of the Day of Atonement: I am fearful that I might be compelled, because of weakness or sickness, to desecrate this holiest of all days. I don't know what to fear, what not to fear; I am utterly confused and ignorant. Modern man is, indeed, existentially a slave,
because he is ignorant and fails to identify his own needs.”

How can one redeem oneself from this kind of slavery? According to Judaism, no-one is irredeemable; all human beings are slaves to the sinful aspects of their personalities, and teshuvah is the ultimate redemption. The central position which teshuvah occupies in our system of thought is based upon the belief that one is free to establish or determine one’s own identity, in either a positive or a negative manner.

While in sin one misidentifies and alienates oneself from the self, in the case of teshuvah one reverses the process of misidentification; he or she discovers him or herself, and returns to one’s true self. Sin causes remoteness from God since it is sin that splits the personality into pure and impure components, but it is the very split in personality that makes teshuvah possible. In summarizing Soloveitchik’s thoughts on sin and teshuvah, Lustiger writes,

“In a sense, we are fortunate that sin performs this function of splitting the human personality, for otherwise, the entire personality would become enveloped in impurity. If the whole personality would be corrupt, it would be impossible to engage in teshuvah. Repentance cannot be creatio ex nihilo: it can be mobilized only from an initially uncorrupted core. Even in the most egregious of transgressors something pure remains. Judaism does not believe in the modern theory that there are irredeemable criminals doomed to spend the rest of their lives in sin. Even Jereboam, the greatest sinner of all, as well as Elisha ben Abuya, were told hazor bakh –return (Sanhedrin 102A). A fundamentally impure personality cannot effect such a return. The split in personality is what makes teshuvah possible.”

Sin must be recognized and remembered because memory of sin releases a power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before. Sin

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56 Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall be Purified, 28-29.
allows one to discover new spiritual forces within the soul and to continue onwards, sanctifying evil and raising it to new heights.

D. SOLOVEITCHIK’S PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF SUFFERING AND THE HALAKHAH

“Eight years ago, in the midst of a night of terror and filled with the horrors of Maidanek, Treblinka, and Buchenwald, in a night of gas chambers and crematoria, in a night of absolute divine self-concealment (hesher panim muhlat), in a night ruled by the satan of doubt and apostasy which sought to sweep the maiden from her house into the Christian church, in a night of continuous searching, of questing for the Beloved- in that very night the Beloved appeared. “God who conceals Himself in His dazzling hiddenness” suddenly manifested Himself and began to knock on the tent of His despondent and disconsolate love, twisting convulsively on her bed, suffering the pains of hell. As a result of the knocks on the door of the maiden, wrapped in mourning, the State of Israel was born!”

Soloveitchik’s personal revelations about suffering and the Halakhah reflect deeply on his understanding of the existential loneliness of the human being. After all, Soloveitchik lived through the Holocaust which informed his biography. The Shoah was not simply a massacre of six million Jews; it was a massacre of an entire world of Torah. Although the theme of the Holocaust does not dominate all of Soloveitchik’s thought and writings the impact on him personally was immense. The aftermath of the Holocaust traumatized him as it left him the sole surviving link to Brisk. He felt responsible to keep

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57 Soloveitchik, “Kol Dodi Dofek: It Is the Voice of My Beloved That Knocketh” translated by Lawrence Kaplan in Soloveitchik, Fate and Destiny, (originally delivered as an address at a public assembly on Yom Ha’Azma’ut at Yeshivat Rabbinat Yitzhak Elhanan of Yeshiva University in NYC, 1956), 25.
58 Although, Soloveitchik does not often use the Holocaust in reference to his theology it is clear from his writings that the ‘night of terror of the gas chambers’ remains a profound influence on his thought. In his moving metaphorical essay, “Kol Dodi Dofek: It is the Voice of My Beloved That Knocketh” he describes the dark chapter in the history of the Jews that has still not come to an end, even with the establishment of the State of Israel. Israel continues to find itself in a crisis situation fraught with wickedness and danger, in fear and trembling of the indifference of the international world community to the principles of justice and righteousness.
the world of Brisk and the memory of his grandfather, Reb Chayyim, alive. His writings are meditations ranging between the *Halakhah* and death. On the one hand he was terrified by the abyss of loneliness and death; on the other hand the *Halakhah* could elevate him and change the perception of time. The normal human response is to ask why this is happening to me, and the *halakhic* response is to ask what shall I do? On the one hand Soloveitchik mourned a whole murdered generation; on the other hand he brought a whole generation back through *teshuvah*. His whole life was dedicated to bringing a dead world back to life as Rakeffet-Rothkoff states, “Brisk has been reborn in a man,” the definitive example of elevating suffering to a higher moral order.

In an intimate epiphany, Soloveitchik described a night of terror when he awakened, thinking that his wife was still alive sleeping in the room next door to him; tragically, he discovered that in reality she had passed away the previous month. “To be jolted with sudden awareness of the grievous extent to which our actions have alienated us from God...We find ourselves alone, bereft of our illusions, terrified and paralyzed before God.” Such illusions must be shattered when one finds oneself awed and in terror before God. For Soloveitchik, like the spiritual seeker, God’s presence is a cure for the fear of darkness and death: “I am ever mindful of the Lord’s presence; He is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken” (Ps. 16:8).

Deeply personal experiences of the fear of death, suffering, and sickness helped Soloveitchik realize his own mortality, and moreover to grasp the ever growing consciousness of God’s presence in his life. Like all mortals, he believed that his wife

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would always be there at his side, or that his grandson would forever be his playmate. In his declining years of illness, when he was admitted to hospital for surgery, Soloveitchik wrote, “The night before my operation when my family said goodbye to me, I understood the words of the psalmist, ‘When my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up’ (Ps. 27:10).”

The ‘fall’ from the heights of illusory mortality, as he calls it, was the greatest achievement in his long hours of anxiety and uncertainty. In fact, says Soloveitchik, it was a rise towards a new existential awareness of the human being’s tragedy and glory. He realized the modesty of his life, the efficacy and dignity of prayer, and in this moment of awareness he experienced a profound sense of peace as he freed himself from the disquieting obsession with immortality. He realized that no pain lasts forever. For Soloveitchik the experience of his approach to death was a process of growth; out of the depths one calls upon God in seclusion and loneliness. It is a singular, lonely experience, inexpressible in universal terms. No one but the sufferer is involved in this deep human anguish and conflict. Yet out of these torments there emerges a new understanding of the world, a powerful spiritual enthusiasm that shakes the very foundations of a person’s existence.

As a result of his own inner and deeply personal experiences, Soloveitchik believed that the encounter with God is imminently possible. Not only must a person have faith in God, but one must feel God’s hand supporting one’s head during times of emotional turmoil. Judaism rests on all three of these attributes: the head, the hand, and the heart. The first two attributes are in abundance, but this last attribute of the heart is

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63 Ibid., 131-134
lacking and Soloveitchik urged that of all three attributes one must feel the pull of the Divine or as the philosopher and author William James put it, “the presence of the Unseen.” One must cleave to God, feel God’s presence, and stand before God with all one’s heart. In a lecture in 1973, Soloveitchik indicated that without this feeling of the presence of God six years earlier, when he suffered the loss of his mother, brother, and his wife, all in the same year he would not have been able to maintain his emotional equilibrium. The perception of God’s proximity was particularly strong during his study of Torah; while poring over the opinions of the Talmudic sages, Abaye and Rava, Soloveitchik stated that he sensed the presence of God with him in the room.

Such personal experiences of God’s presence and such a profound theology and are at the heart of Soloveitchik’s teachings which lay the foundation for the contemporary spiritual seeker who longs for God’s company and consolation in times of personal turmoil: in the ascent and in the descent, in affirmation and negation, in self-abnegation and appreciation, in the profane and the holy, in the oppositions and incongruities, in the spiritual doubts and uncertainties. Only in the struggle deep within the soul may one emerge renewed and transformed. The power that is stored in human beings is exceedingly great, but all too often it lies dormant in a deep sleep. The choice to be an individual, to actualize oneself, and to realize one’s potential is to meet God. In this regard, I now turn to Chapter Two in which I will address Soloveitchik and his theology of prayer in order to understand the possibilities of the depth of the encounter between God and human beings.

65 Lustiger, Before Hashem You shall Be Purified, 135-136.
CHAPTER TWO

SOLOVEITCHIK’S THEOLOGY OF PRAYER AS COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND GOD

Soloveitchik’s understanding of the history of the individual’s longing for God, and his profound appreciation of prayer as covenantal relationship between human beings and the Divine, reveals a theme that is at the centre of any seeker who struggles to make sense of God’s presence in his or her life. The obligation to love God with all one’s heart and all one’s might stems from the fate of a lonely people who, until the covenant was created at Sinai, shared an historical covenant of fate and suffering from the lonely wanderings of Abraham to slavery in Egypt. It is at Sinai that the community becomes unified when God presents the covenant to Moses who presents it to the people. The lonely Jew now finds consolation from alienation by connecting with the God of one’s people in community. In solitude and despair, in joy and jubilation, the individual can now access God through “Prayer [which is] is basically an awareness of man finding himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, [as] to pray has one connotation only: to stand before God.”66 This revelation, interpreted by Soloveitchik, as a movement from fate to destiny is an expression of the powerful spirit of the human being who finds him or herself bound to God’s covenant with commitment and love.

A. HALAKHIC INNOVATIONS OF PRAYER: OUTWARD ACTION AND INNER MOVEMENT

Moses Maimonides, a pre-eminent Jewish philosopher and Torah scholar of the Middle Ages, taught that prayer is a Biblical commandment which one is obligated to do from a practical halakhic point of view. However, Soloveitchik wrote that even

66 Soloveitchik, The Lonely Man of Faith, 56.
Maimonides, the great rationalist and traditionalist, admitted that a logical and intellectual approach to prayer is not enough. The intellectual quest must express itself also in an act of love whereby a person attaches oneself to God with *devekut* (devotion).\(^67\)

Although Soloveitchik also recognized the dynamics of a people’s obligation to fulfil a *mitzvah* (legal requirement), he acknowledged that,\(^67\)

> “The popular Biblical term *tefillah* (prayer) and the esoteric *halakhic* term *avodah*- *she-be-lev* (service of the heart) refer to an inner activity, to a state of mind. *Kavanah* (intention) related to prayer, is, unlike the *kavanah* concerning other *mitzvah* (good-deed) performances, not an extraneous addendum, but the very core of prayer... in prayer one must direct one’s whole self toward God whereas in the case of other *mitzvot* the directing is confined to a single act.”\(^68\)

Prayer is clearly a recital of set liturgical text, but movement of the lips is not enough; it must be accompanied by *kavanah* not in the ordinary sense of ‘intention,’ but rather as an interior focus: meditation, spiritual surrender, turning and directing, or aiming the heart inward to God. The inward turning to God is of utmost significance. This *halakhic* and philosophic innovation became a basic principle of the Jewish world view with which Soloveitchik deeply identified.

The *Halakhah* teaches that if one fails to direct one’s heart towards God while reading the *Shema* (“Hear O Israel”- central prayer) one’s obligation remains unfulfilled. The *Talmud* (oral interpretations of the *Torah*), *Mishnah Berakhot* 2:1 states: “He [the student] was reading the *Torah* and the time for *Shema* arrived: If he directed his heart to read, he fulfilled the obligation.”\(^69\)

Not everyone comes to the spiritual or devotional easily, but Maimonides instructs that one must, “Turn your thoughts away from


\(^{68}\) Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 74.

\(^{69}\) Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, 90.
everything while you read the *Shema* or during *tefillah* [prayer]...practice for many
years...have all your heart and thought occupied with understanding what you read or
hear.\footnote{Ibid., 93} Prayer is considered a conversation, a dialogue, a colloquy between human
beings and God. In prayer one establishes contact with God; the miracle of revelation
repeats itself. Prayer is a private and intimate affair involving the whole personality in a
mystical experience not confined to a single area of one’s personality. Praying is a great
all embracing passionate performance in which the cosmos shrinks to just one point, the
encounter between the human being and God.\footnote{Ibid., 95-96}

However, according to the tradition, the *Halakhah* is distrustful of the
genuineness and depth of the inner life because it is vague, transient, and volatile, and
therefore the *Halakhah* introduces at least two specific aspects to the understanding of the
commandments to pray. The first are concrete acts as a manifestation of religious feeling.
The act itself is enough, even if the *kavannah* (intention) is peripheral. The *kavannah*
does not have to have inner feeling to be religiously significant. Eating *matzah*
(unleavened bread) on Passover, donning *tefillin* (phylacteries) for morning prayers,
shaking the *lulav* (four species) on the harvest festival of *Sukkot* are mandated and
mechanical acts. The mood of the doer is not called into question. God summons the
hand and not the heart.\footnote{Ibid., 15-16}

In the second sub group of commandments for prayer, thoughts, feelings, and
volition are called to account as inner movement and outer action must parallel one
another. It is not enough to simply rejoice on a holy festival, but one must feast as well.
There must be an external symbol of the exalted mood. Similarly when one is in
mourning, one must conform to the ritual acts of burial and mourning such as the tearing of one’s clothing; these observances must be performed. They are personal, intimate, and indefinable but they are the antecedents to that which exists in the depths of a great experience, a spiritual act, an ecstatic heart, or a downtrodden spirit overcome by shock. Both the external act of the prayer and the inner experience is the essence of the mitzvah. The physical divorced from the inner is worthless. 73

In addition to these and other legal obligations, Maimonides also took a strong position that prayer without kavannah is no prayer at all. If the kavannah does not represent inward devotion or commitment, it is deprived of significance and no religious performance has occurred.


Prayer may also be private, informal, subjective, overwhelming, and mysterious, a service of the heart. Kavannah forms the core of the act of prayer and it is the avodah-she-belev (prayer of the heart) that is all encompassing and all-pervasive which represents the essence of a person’s relationship with God. 75 One turns to God with the heart and not only with words. As Soloveitchik writes,

“Prayer, which is like a mirror reflecting the image of the person who worships God with heart and soul, is shot through with perplexity, for worship itself is rooted in the human dialectical consciousness. Hence prayer is not marked by monotonous uniformity. It is multi-colored: it contains contradictory themes, expresses a variety of moods, conflicting experiences, and desires

73 Ibid., 17-20
74 Ibid., 21
75 Ibid., 147
oscillating in opposing directions. Religious experience is a multi-directional movement, metaphysically infused. Prayer too does not proceed slowly along one straight path, but leaps and cascades from wondrous heights to terrifying depths, and back.”

This yoking together of intellect and passion is deeply entrenched in the halakhic and philosophical outlook; one cannot exist without the other as they are embedded in the mystery of human consciousness.

B. PRAYER AS ROOTED IN THE EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE OF HUMAN EMOTION AND LIFE

Since Biblical times, the central theme of prayer has been petition (Gen. 24:12; 25:21). “Petition flows from an aching heart. Hymn emerges from an enraptured soul gazing at the Mystery of creation, and thanksgiving is sung by one who has attained redemption through the grace of God.” The Amidah (central daily prayer) is completely devoted to petition. Its three-fold structure represents petition, hymn, and thanksgiving. Petition is the prominent emotion expressed in the religious experience since prayer has the ability to bridge the distance between the longings of the heart and a God who may appear to be distant. In other words, although the prophecy of the Bible is over, the immediate apprehension of God has not been eliminated from the perspective of contemporary religious experience. There are ways to feel God’s imminence. The overcoming of Divine absence is the overcoming of a person’s loneliness, and it is through prayer that “man accomplishes the impossible: the transformation of the

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76 Ibid., 148
77 Ibid., 28
numinous into the kerygomatic, fear into love and absence into presence.”\(^78\) Prayer is one of the deepest expressions and reflections of human nature:

> “Through the medium of *avodah-she-be-lev* man tries to express his closeness to and endless remoteness from God, his love, his fear, his anguish, his serenity, his unshakeable faith and his satanic doubts, his joy and his sorrow, his being and his non-being, his capacity both for achieving greatness and for falling into the abyss of smallness.”\(^79\)

Prayer is a gift, and it is God who calls one to enter into prayer. Soloveitchik often repeated the conviction that prayer is democratic; it is for ordinary men and women. It is liturgy that is rooted in the everyday emotions and experiences endemic to the human condition: praise, need, gratitude, and devotion. Prayer cannot be separated from life and the secular cannot be divided from the sacred. The invitation to pray is extended not in the synagogue alone, but in the bedroom, the factory, the restaurant, the club and the office. The human being encounters God in all areas of his or her life.

> “Prayer is not merely an additional stage in the worship of the heart, but... the mirror that reflects soul of the worshipper who it totally and perpetually committed to God... Prayer is a kind of information center which reports occurrences in the depth of the love-sick soul. Prayer cannot be separated from life... Prayer is intertwined with the purity of life and the sanctity of one’s overall existence.”\(^80\)

Prayer finds its way into the realization of every human being regardless of spiritual limitations. Efficacy is not the goal of prayer and Judaism never promises that God accepts all prayer; but all prayer is welcomed by God wherever there is need and the

\(^78\) Ibid., xxii
\(^79\) Ibid., 25
\(^80\) Ibid; 165-166
nature of the human condition is that human beings are always in need because there is always crisis and despair.\textsuperscript{81}

All prayer - intellectual, ethical, emotional and dialogical - is concerned with the unqualified dependence of human beings on God, wherein God is \textit{shomea tefillah} (the One who listens to prayer) and the human being is the speaker. Prayer is the continuation of prophecy. The difference between the two is that within the prophetic community, God takes the initiative; God speaks and humans listen, whereas in the prayer community, the initiative belongs to human beings; the people do the speaking and God listens.\textsuperscript{82} When one comes face-to-face with God through the act of prayer, “And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face as man speaketh unto his friend” (Ex. 33:17; Num.12: 6-8), the human being has the capacity to renew and transform him or herself.\textsuperscript{83}

“Prayer is the language of faith, and the prayer book is the map of the Jewish mind. The song Jews sing to God is the music of the Jewish soul, and somehow in time beyond time and space beyond space, our finitude meets God's infinity and we are brushed by the wings of the Divine presence, the Shekhinah... Prayer is the place where our speaking meets God's listening, and in ways we will never understand, we are transformed.”\textsuperscript{84}

The strength of Soloveitchik as a teacher is that he comprehended the sadness and pain within the broader framework of Jewish and human existence. His impulse to seek contemporary existential equivalents for the extraordinary phenomena presented in the Bible is characteristic of his thinking; divine discourse of Scripture must always have something to say to the human condition. It is this necessary understanding of

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid; 35
\textsuperscript{82} Soloveitchik, \textit{The Lonely Man of Faith}, 57.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 55
\textsuperscript{84} Jonathan Sacks, \textit{http://lists.communications.chiefrabbi.org/mailman/listinfo/covenantandconversation} (accessed October 4, 2011)
Soloveitchik’s theology that sets the groundwork for broadening the perspectives of prayer through Jewish meditation and spiritual direction whereby today’s seeker may come closer to God to relieve his or her existential longings, loneliness, and suffering.

C. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAYER IN TIMES OF DISTRESS

According to Soloveitchik, the first redeemer and revolutionary figure of prayer was Maimonides. It was he who introduced the idea of the singular importance of prayer in times of trouble and distress, saying in unequivocal terms that “prayer is the only medium through which man may normally rehabilitate himself” (*Hilkhot Ta’anit* 1:1-3). By saying that prayer is Biblically ordained and identical with the service of the heart, Maimonides restored love, fear, wretchedness, helplessness, confusion, joy and indeed the entirety of religion back to life by allowing people to connect to their God through prayer. Soloveitchik, too, was keenly aware of the fundamental connection between distress and prayer. Whether it is an external calamity such as illness or an internal depth crisis, distress prayer is always meaningful as long as one’s feelings are sincere and genuine. He writes, “prayer [is thus] an expression of the soul that yearns for God via the medium of the word, through which the human being gives expression to the storminess of his soul and spirit.” King Solomon defined prayer as the outcry of the person in the dark night of disaster (I Kings, 8:33). In the darkness God hears one’s prayers; God reveals God’s self through prayer to bring light to the darkness. People pray when they are in anguish; similarly, people yearn for a way to access God through

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85 Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 76.  
87 Ibid., 6-8  
88 Ibid., 146  
89 Ibid., 29
spiritual practices like meditation and spiritual direction when they feel hopeless and in despair.

Judaism rejected models of existence which deny human need and suffering such as the mystical, the angelic, or the monastic. Prayer in Judaism, unlike the prayer of classical mysticism, is bound up with human needs, wants, drives, and urges which make a person suffer. Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual and the community what its genuine needs are and about what he or she should or should not petition God. Of the nineteen benedictions in the liturgy thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions are petitional in nature. The person in need is summoned to pray. 90 God wants to hear one cry out in genuine need.

In this regard Soloveitchik distinguishes between suffering and pain. Suffering is not pain; pain is instinctual, immediate, and non-reflective. About suffering he says,

“Suffering or distress, in contradistinction to pain, is not a sensation but an experience, a spiritual reality known only to humans (the animal does not suffer). This spiritual reality is encountered by a person whenever one stands to lose either one’s sense of existential security (as in the case of an incurable disease) or one’s existential dignity (as in the case of public humiliation). Whenever a merciless reality clashes with the human existential awareness, man suffers and finds himself in distress.” 91

Through genuine prayer one becomes aware of one’s needs. The outpouring of the heart merges with the insights of the mind. Prayer is self reflection; to pray means to discriminate, to evaluate, to understand, to ask intelligently: “I pray for the gratification of some needs since I consider them worthy of being gratified. I refrain from petitioning

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91 Ibid., 67
God for the satisfaction of other wants because it will not enhance my dignity."\(^{92}\) Once a human being gains insight into one’s true self, by activating the intellect, he or she finds him or herself on the road towards discovering ultimate redemption. When one recognizes oneself, he or she is no longer lonely and anonymous; one finds freedom because one becomes aware of one’s intellectual creative capacities. This inner awareness of needs and the intellectual capacity are both cathartic and redemptive. At this level, prayer makes one feel whole and dignified. The human being now makes the ultimate sacrifice by returning wholly to God. One is no longer alone; one is fully claimed by God through suffering and redemption.

**D. PRAYER AS REDEMPTION AND TRANSFORMATION**

The search for the concealed, transcendent God is reflected in the obligation of prayer and repentance throughout the year, “And from there you will seek Hashem, your God, and you will find Him... (Deuteronomy 4:29).”\(^{93}\) As the High Holy Days approach, God’s remoteness gradually diminishes, reflected in the experiences, the rituals, and the prayers as one moves from *Rosh Hashana* through the Ten Days of Repentance to culmination in *Yom Kippur*. If one internalizes the truly awesome power of the Day of Atonement, he or she emerges from *Yom Kippur* a different person. Through prayer and atonement, the human being discerns God’s presence in the natural world. Despite God’s great distance and *hester panim* (hidden face), God is still accessible.

Maimonides wrote that “it is the universal custom to awaken at night in these ten days and to pray in the synagogue words of supplication until day breaks” (*Hilkhot*

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 71

\(^{93}\) Lustiger, *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*, 5.
Night time is when one’s self-confidence wanes and one is a lonely creature, weaker than the animals. Only God can save one, and for this reason Selichot (prayers of forgiveness) constitutes prayers at night, a special convocation of reconciliation between human beings and God just days before Yom Kippur. Only through regret, resolve not to repeat the sin, reparation, and confession in words can a person wrench oneself from the unpleasant truth. The entire liturgy for the Day of Atonement is geared to crying over and over again, “O, I beseech Thee.” Only after twenty four consecutive hours of fasting and prayer, at Neilah (the conclusion of the service) are the gates unlocked and one may enter as final confession is made.

The goal of the whole service on the Day of Atonement is purification and sanctification by elevation of sin, not blotting out of sin. On Yom Kippur God comes closest to the human being. On Yom Kippur God knocks on the door of every Jew. God yearns to be close to God’s people and God facilitates the way for Israel’s return. God effects purification and God has mercy on the entire creation, Jew and non-Jew alike, because without such forgiveness one would be lost forever in spiritual isolation and desolation. God removes all obstacles on this day and shows one how to do teshuvah. “God grants atonement as an act of grace, while man through his own efforts attains purification through teshuvah.” God approaches human beings on Yom Kippur because God has no choice. God is compelled to forgive the people: “Peace, peace to him that is distant and that is near, says Hashem...and I will heal him (Isa. 57:19).” Repentance is a service of the heart; it is a process that extends over a life time, beginning with remorse, a sense of guilt, increasing awareness that there is no purpose to life, a feeling of

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94 As quoted in Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified, 45.
95 Ibid., 99
96 Ibid., 101
isolation, being lost, adrift and spiritually bankrupt, and the road that one must travel is very long until a metamorphosis is achieved and one renews oneself through repentance. The obligations of this sacred day are obligations of the soul and not the body.

E. SOLOVEITCHIK'S PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF THE PRAYER EXPERIENCE

Soloveitchik’s own intimate accounts of prayer and the holy days describe how both his mother and father taught him to feel the joy and the warmth of the Shekhinah (God’s feminine presence). Such affirmation of Jewish living is essential for all who long for and desire a private encounter with the Divine, not only in formal compliance with the law, but also in the sanctification of the privacy of one’s heart and home and in the cosmic phenomenon of the natural world.

“Permit me to draw upon my own experiences. I used to have long conversations with my mother. In fact, it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She talked and I "happened" to overhear. What did she talk about? I must use a halakhic term in order to answer this question: she talked [to me about] inyana de-yoma [matters of the day]. I used to watch her arranging the house in honour of a holiday. I used to see her recite prayers; I used to watch her recite the sidra [Torah portion] every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much. Most of all, I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in private, poignant, living experience.”

Soloveitchik’s mother taught him that the Sabbath as a living entity, a Queen, is to be enjoyed for her twenty-four hour presence:

“there is a flavour, a scent, a warmth to mitzvot. I learned from her the most important thing in life - to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting on my frail shoulders. Without her teachings

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which quite often were transmitted in silence, I would have grown up soulless, being dry and insensitive...the Rebbetzin taught how to feel the presence of God...to appreciate the mitzvot and spiritual values, to enjoy the warmth of a dedicated life...the room looked the way I imagined Sarah’s tent must have looked. It was enveloped in a cloud, and there was the shekhinah...”

Soloveitchik recounted that the emotions and nostalgia of earlier generations of Jews which overtook him during his experiences as a child still stimulated him as an adult and were part of his entire Weltanschauung, his whole religious philosophy:

“My religious world view was formed not only through learning Torah, but also by my religious experience...I continually refer to the two traditions of Torah learning—halakhah and that of religious life and feeling—the enthusiasm, the love of Hashem, the yearning for Hashem...The first is relatively easy to impart; I can give long lectures on shofar[ram’s horn], the halakhot of teshuvah[laws of repentance], the Avodah [service/prayer], etc. with great depth and thoroughness. Yet what is easy for me [to explain] regarding the first tradition is very difficult regarding the second tradition...

As a child, I remember how infectious that emotion was: I felt the same yearning as everyone else without really understanding what exactly I was yearning for...

Contemporary Orthodoxy is well grounded intellectually. In spite of this, however, its followers lack passion and enthusiasm. This deficiency is especially evident on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur...

How can a Jew pray on Yom Kippur and not feel the greatness, the fire and the holiness of this day? How can I possibly impart such an experience? Perhaps one can begin to awaken the ecstatic feeling by discussing the customs and laws which we observe on Yom Kippur. From within the allegedly dry confines of Jewish law there is an awesome, warm, enormous world-- there is a definite transition from Halakah to the service of Hashem. Perhaps through such discussion, the audience will be awakened to the religious mood that a Jew must find himself in on Yom Kippur.”

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98 Ibid., 77
99 Soloveitchik as quoted in, Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall be Purified, 59-60.
Soloveitchik describes the absolute necessity of the instinctive, spontaneous, and sudden experience of the true redemptive power of God’s imminence through hirhur teshuvah (awakening repentance) on Rosh Hashana (New Year). “The intense experience results in pahad, terror. Pahad overwhelms and paralyzes the individual...And the great shofar will be sounded and a still, thin voice will be heard, and the angels shake, terror and trembling will seize them.”100 The mitzvah of hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashana involves a ritualistic, objective act coupled with a subjective experience. The jarring awakening of the sound of the shofar is an emotional and obligatory experience that awakens one from his or her spiritual complacency. This required response is what Maimonides refers to as awakening from sleep. One is jolted with sudden awareness of the grievous extent to which one’s actions have alienated one from God. One finds oneself paralyzed before God. The devout commitment to bare one’s soul in prayer before one’s Maker, and to hear the shofar shatters one’s illusions in the hope of returning to God.101 In addition, Soloveitchik recalls how his rebbe would say there is no greater joy than the coronation of God which takes place on Rosh Hashana; the second set of shofar blasts later in the prayers of the day reflects a mood of happiness. These conflicting themes of the prayers of the day reveal the ultimate transformation that takes place as one progresses from the necessary emotion of terror to awe to teshuvah culminating in the Day of Atonement.102

Soloveitchik reinforces the intimate and powerful religious experience that he felt the day before Yom Kippur:

100 Ibid., 10
101 Ibid., 9-10
102 Ibid., 11-13
“I remember how difficult it was to go to sleep on Erev (eve) Yom Kippur. The shohet (ritual slaughterer) used to come at the break of dawn to provide chickens for the kaparos (slaughter of chickens to absolve one’s sins) ritual, and later the people would give charity... the final meal before the fast[seudah hamafsekes], my grandfather’s preparations—all made Erev Yom Kippur a special entity, not only Halakhic but emotional and religious as well.”

Erev Yom Kippur has a special halakhic status that transcends that of a simple weekday. It is appended to the day of Yom Kippur itself in respect to the holiness of the day, and especially since it is a time of repentance and forgiveness for the individual and for the many. Therefore, while it is still daytime one is obligated to do teshuvah and vidui (confession) “...before one eats [the evening meal], in case one chokes on his meal [and expires] before having confessed (Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:7).” One is obligated to eat a festive meal before the fast; it is different from the eating of a weekday meal and reflects the holiness of Yom Kippur itself. Thus the confession and festive meal on Erev Yom Kippur is an extension of and identified with Yom Kippur itself. The importance of this eve is implied in the Biblical verse: “For through this day He will atone for you, to purify you; from all your sins before Hashem you shall be purified” (Lev. 16:30). Maimonides explains the phrase, “before Hashem you shall be purified” as meaning that before one enters Yom Kippur, one must be pure. Proper preparation both physically and spiritually is necessary to stand before God on this holiest of all days.

In Halakhic Man, Soloveitchik narrates a cherished childhood scene on the afternoon of the Day of Atonement:

“I remember how once on the Day of Atonement, I went outside into the synagogue courtyard with my father [R.

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103 Ibid; 60-61
104 Ibid; 67
105 Ibid; 66
Moses Soloveitchik, just before the Ne’ila service. It had been a fresh, clear day, one of the fine, almost delicate days of summer’s end, filled with sunshine and light...the sun was sinking in the west...into a sea of purple and gold. R. Moses, a halakhic man par excellence, turned to me and said: “This sunset differs from ordinary sunsets for with it forgiveness is bestowed upon us for our sins” (the end of day atones.) The Day of Atonement and forgiveness of sin merged and blended here with the splendour and beauty of the world...”

The uniqueness of Yom Kippur is that it is a day which separates itself from all other days of the year in that the day itself is invested with power to provide atonement. It is a singular day in the year, a ‘powerful day’ in the year. Soloveitchik mentions the "itzumo shel hayom" (essence of the day) in numerous teachings as the most sublime mystery. As Lustiger explains,

“The word itzumo means ‘strength.’ The potency of the day is subjective, directly proportional to the feeling of the Jew On Yom Kippur...To some, the itzumo shel yom can indeed be great and powerful. Its sheer gratness has the capability of shocking and traumatizing the individual; he feels as though he is standing directly in front of an all-embracing God...If one internalizes the truly awesome power of the day, he emerges from Yom Kippur a different person.”

For Soloveitchik, it is not as much about the potency of the day as it is about “experiencing the itzumo shel yom, and feeling the warm embrace of Hashem. The atonement one receives through the itzumo shel yom is directly proportional to the closeness one feels towards Hashem. Through this experience the penitent provides “power” to the day.”

The direct revelation of the Creator has always been explained by Judaism as a revelation of kevod Elokim (majesty/honour of God). Beauty, grace, and loveliness flow from God out into the world. Soloveitchik believed that religious

106 Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, 38.
107 Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified, 130
108 Ibid; 131
sensibility manifested itself in experiential immediacy; like prayer, the aesthetic is also an avenue through which the human being may encounter God,

“Only the aesthetic experience, if linked with the exalted, may bring man directly into contact with God, loving, personal and intimate. Only through coming into contact with the beautiful and exalted may we 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.”109

The ‘aesthetic’ experience he is referring to is not just a sensory perception, but rather also includes the quality of the sublime, the Mystery which Soloveitchik sees as connected to the beautiful. To experience God’s forgiveness on the holiest day of the year in the beauty of God’s own creation is the deepest experience of prayer and devotion.

It is clear from his theology and the emotion expressed in these deeply personal and poignant living experiences of Jewish life and prayer that Soloveitchik believed that the encounter with God was imminently possible and truly necessary to deepening the sanctification of the laws. As he stated, “From within the allegedly dry confines of Jewish law, there is an awesome, warm, enormous world—there is a definite transition from Halakhah to service of Hashem.”110 One of Soloveitchik’s most profound regrets was that the ‘attribute of the heart’ was found wanting among contemporary Jews. The heart involves experiencing God emotionally since “God desires the heart (Sanhedrin 106b)”.111 Soloveitchik explains that the direct presence of God may be felt in companionship and closeness, in the stillness of a clear star-lit night, in the embrace of a child, in the joy of spiritual accomplishment, in the thirst for God, and in the hope of

110 Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified, 60.
111 Ibid., 135
experiencing God’s nearness even in the misery of humiliation, despair, and emptiness. As the psalmist cries, “My God, My God why hast Thou forsaken me” (Ps.22:2; 24:7). When one is in communication with God, one suddenly feels unburdened and can experience this religious emotionality. As Soloveitchik writes, “In a word, the emotional life of a human being is an outstanding medium of communication with God.”\textsuperscript{112} One’s life is suddenly filled with positive significance and one experiences boundless joy in existing.

The covenant that God made with God’s people at Sinai was not exclusively a call to unconditional obedience, but rather one that understood the relationship between God and the Jewish people to be that of a deep intimacy and partnership, a relationship that demands intellectual independence which infuses one’s religious life with meaning and purpose. But Soloveitchik also stresses the emotional bond of the covenant: “The crux of prayer manifests itself in a feeling of companionship with Him and mainly in experiencing Him face to face (\textit{panim el panim}); in having my whole self talk not only towards Him but also \textit{with} Him, confronting Him.”\textsuperscript{113}

In summary, in this chapter I have discussed the \textit{halakhic} innovations of prayer according to the theology of Soloveitchik and I have also described prayer as rooted in the ordinary, everyday experience of a person’s life. I have delineated the need for prayer during times of despair and how prayer can be redemptive and transformative. In addition, I have illustrated the personal prayer experiences of Soloveitchik, himself and ultimately how this precious covenantal bond between the individual and God is sanctioned and lifted up through prayer. In Chapter Three, I will show how the

\textsuperscript{112} Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship of the Heart}, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 99
contemporary practices of Jewish spiritual direction and Jewish meditation enhance the experience of the sacred covenental relationship. I will attempt to focus intently on a heart based approach to spiritual practice within the bounds of Jewish theology. I intend to relate Soloveitchik’s theology of suffering and prayer with the spiritual longings of the contemporary seeker who seeks God’s nearness and companionship.
CHAPTER THREE

SOLOVEITCHIK’S THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING AND PRAYER AND CURRENT JEWISH PRACTICES OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND MEDITATION

Soloveitchik’s anxiety and suffering were certainly borne out of a very different time and place in history when his Eastern European world collapsed upon him as compared to the world of today’s anguished spiritual seeker. Contemporary distress is more likely to come from an overly collectivised experience in which individual expression may be suppressed by a patriarchal, mainstream religious world view, or alternatively it may arise from an obsession with individuality and self, or simply from the ennui of an overly intellectual and technological life and a desire for something greater than self. Yet, despite very different triggers, the human condition of existential loneliness, alienation, and torment is genuine for both times. The practices involved in Jewish spiritual direction and meditation are intended to reawaken and cultivate what Soloveitchik referred to as the “attribute of the heart” which he admittedly regretted was found wanting among many contemporary Jews. Just as Soloveitchik’s practice and profound understanding of prayer, study of Torah, and the Halakhah showed how to be elevated out of the depths of suffering toward God, so too can the practices of spiritual direction and meditation, grounded in Jewish tradition, direct hearts reverently toward God to discern with sincere awareness God’s role in our lives to raise us from the extant anguish.

For all Jews, the past is as important as the present. Finding precedent in Jewish tradition for new practices is essential to provide a foundation for modern Jews who hunger for a meaningful and personal spiritual life and practice, but often cannot find it.

114 Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified, 135.
within mainstream organizations and institutions. Some do not believe in God, certainly not in the God with whom they were raised. And yet on asking the question, “Where is God or the Holy present in one’s life?” answers sometimes flow more freely. Contemporary scholars and practitioners in spiritual direction like Zari Weiss write, “...something begins to shift, there is a softening, an opening, the beginning of a kind of inner peace... a letting go to the Divine Mystery that is at work in the Universe, a Mystery that is beyond our human understanding...” 115 God then becomes a living reality, not merely a projection left over from the memory of childhood, Bible stories, or meaningless recollections of stringent laws.

As this sacred work of individual and group spiritual guidance and meditation, promoted by qualified lay members, materialises in new territory within Jewish community life, there is much learning still to be acquired from both theory and practice. In this emerging prospective, Soloveitchik’s teachings on suffering and prayer offer a profound and supportive relationship between theology and spiritual practice. In this chapter, I will attempt to explain how the traditional teachings of Soloveitchik help to ground the contemporary practices of spiritual direction and meditation that are surfacing within some Jewish communities and congregations today.

A. DRAWING NEAR TO GOD

For Soloveitchik, there was no doubt that God was at the centre of a person’s life in his or her suffering, whether he or she knew it or not, and that God remained central to one’s prayer life and sacred celebrations and/or mourning. In Judaism, a person may

integrate God in one’s life through the three sacred pillars of the Jewish tradition: *Avodah* (prayer), *Torah* (study of Scripture), and *Gemillut Chasadim* (mutual deeds of loving kindness). These pillars are often practised through meditation, music, appreciation of nature, ritual, movement of the body, silence, listening, breathing, contemplation and chanting - techniques common to contemporary spirituality. In spite of an inherited ambivalence and theological distrust of talking about God with one another, or the discomfort with intimate sharing of the holy, many Jews in this generation are gradually beginning to reclaim their own experiences of God’s presence in the ordinary as well as extraordinary moments of their lives. Contemporary spirituality is a venue for their reclaiming of God.

It is, however, important to note the historic basis for such ambivalence and distrust. First, the Bible itself reveals ambivalence about God’s visibility and accessibility. On the one hand God is so other, so beyond human perception that no human can see God and live. Moses asks to see God but is told this is not possible: "You cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live" (Ex 33: 20). Yet, God proposes a solution to this problem: "Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen" (Ex 33: 21-23). Of course, this close encounter with God changes Moses forever; moments of revelation are times of trepidation. On the other hand, God constantly transcends otherness and appears to humans in any number of places and forms. The sacred record of the Jewish people, the *Torah*, tells us that the ancestors experienced God or God’s presence in various ways: a call to go forward into unknown territory (Gen.
a pillar of smoke and a pillar of fire that traveled with the Children of Israel as they journeyed through the desert (Num. 14:14); a bush that burned and was not consumed (Ex. 3:2).116

As Soloveitchik notes,

“The question of whether the Deity’s connection with the world is transcendent or imminent is irrelevant. Man sometimes attempts to find God within reality and sometimes beyond it. It all depends on the viewpoint of the individual who searches. There are many facets to man’s awareness of God, which is replete with the absolute and the eternal, yet reverberates within a contingent, temporal creature…The search is an act of self-transcendence, which is truly the essence of man’s cultural ascent.”117

Soloveitchik’s idea of searching for God through an act of self-transcendence is one of the intentions of contemporary spiritual practice. The traditional practice of the recitation of blessings is one method of achieving this self-transcendence that is common to both Jewish theological practice, as Soloveitchik understood it, and to contemporary spiritual practice. Reciting one hundred blessings each day is a traditional way that Jews have sought to maintain gratitude for God and a constant awareness of God; every bite of food, every sunrise or rainbow, every bodily function has a bracha (blessing). In contemporary spiritual practice, spiritual guides encourage participants to repeat certain words. The repetition of a holy phrase gives the mind something to do and directs the mind to a higher purpose. The hasidim called this practice gerushin (dispelling), ridding oneself of unwanted thoughts. This practice brings about calmness and peace.

Rami Shapiro, a teacher of Jewish spirituality, writes that Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev would immerse himself in God-consciousness by repeating, Ha-Rahaman:

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116 Ibid., 31-33
The Merciful, Compassionate One, over and over without ceasing. The ongoing recitation of the Divine Names is a well-known technique for the attainment of higher states of consciousness. As it says in Psalm 16: 8, “I have set the Divine Name before me always.” Shapiro adds that the author of Sefer ha-Hayyim said, “One who repeats the Holy Names in order to be shown whatever one wishes, or to inform one of a hidden matter, and then the Holy Spirit, ‘Ruah Ha-Kodesh’ reveals itself to one and one trembles… because of the strength of the Holy Spirit.” The ultimate goal of these mystical techniques was the attainment of “unio mystica,” union with the Divine. This practice unites the human and Divine minds. One attained devekut, cleaving to God, by causing the Divine Spiritual Force to descend upon one. By engaging in this spiritual practice, today’s seekers are able to achieve Soloveitchik’s understanding of self-transcendence and to be aware of God at all times in their daily lives.

Even though the tradition upholds the inaccessibility and incomprehensibility of God, Soloveitchik has shown through personal lived experience and in the depth of his theology that God’s presence can be made available to us moment by moment in our mundane daily lives, as well as in the sacred experiences of the Sabbath, the festivals and the High Holy days. This latter dimension of opening one’s heart to the presence of the Divine supports the contemporary Jewish practice of spiritual direction and meditation even as the first dimension of a traditional Jewish theology must be maintained.

119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
B. THE ROLE OF THE SPIRITUAL GUIDE

Another example of how Soloveitchik is relevant to contemporary spiritual practice is Soloveitchik’s view of God’s omnipresence as a spiritual companion. For Soloveitchik, God is the Guide who directs the anguished seeker who is searching for moments of holiness to awaken and elevate him or herself to the mystery of God. Ultimately, God receives those who sacrifice through loneliness and longing. According to Soloveitchik, as it says in the Scripture:

“But if you search there for the Lord your God, you will find Him, if only you seek Him with all your heart and soul – when you are in distress because all these things have befallen you and, in the end, return to the Lord your God and obey Him. For the Lord your God is a compassionate God...He will not forget the covenant which He made on oath with your fathers” (Deut. 4:29-31).

According to Jewish law, finding means acquiring; in seeking and searching with all one’s soul, one may acquire rights in God. “...[I]t is possible for the true seeker, who has the good fortune to find the lost object, to acquire it.” Thus, Soloveitchik taught that one’s burdens are lifted when one communicates with God. There is this mysterious relationship between God and God’s creation which lifts one from darkness to light.

From its inception, Jewish tradition has recognized that seekers need spiritual companionship along life’s journey to assist them in communicating with God, especially in times of loss and spiritual crisis. In antiquity the role of spiritual guide was fulfilled in part by both priests and prophets (I Samuel, 1:3; II Kings, 4). For the last two centuries, formal guidance has been offered in Orthodox yeshivot (seminaries) by mashgichim (spiritual advisors). During the 19th century the spiritual advisor taught about Mussar.

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122 Ibid.
(moral and ethical practices and behaviour) in addition to providing personal and religious guidance through study and private conversation. In Hasidism (a branch of Orthodox Jewish mysticism), the primary spiritual guide is the rebbe who offers spiritual counsel, practical advice, blessings and intercessory prayer. When the rebbe is absent or in larger communities, the mashpia (spiritual prompter) offers guidance and instruction. As the rabbis teach, “Acquire a companion for yourself...to reveal all your secrets, both in matters of Torah and in matters of the world” (Avot deRebbe Natan, 8).  

According to Yoel Glick, teacher of Jewish meditation and spirituality, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810) urged his hasidim (disciples) to share with each other their spiritual experiences and Torah insights. He commanded them to gather together on a regular basis to speak about their love for God and their love for their teacher. In addition, Reb Elimelech of Lzhensk advised his hasidim to share not only their insights and spiritual experiences with each other, but also their faults and imperfections: the strange thoughts that come into their hearts during prayer and learning, the images and desires that arise as they are lying in their beds, the temptations that they have fallen into while going about the business of their daily life. “Hold back nothing from each other,” Reb Elimelech told them, “Do not let fear or shame keep you from sharing your struggles.”

In today’s liberal Judaism, however, continuous spiritual guidance to further and deepen one’s religious growth and connection to God has mostly not been available, largely due to the preference of modern and secular therapeutic techniques over traditional forms of counsel. Increasingly, however, progressive Jews seem to desire a

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123 Howard Avruhm Addison and Barbara Eve Breitman, eds., Jewish Spiritual Direction, xvii.
form of companionship on the spiritual path that is personal, intimate, contemplative and grounded in recognizable religious practice. Human beings today instinctively long for God, as did the ancestors. As Soloveitchik revealed, often this longing and seeking causes emotional and spiritual disturbances that confuse the mind and the heart. So what ought one to do if one lacks faith? What ought one to do if one’s prayers become mechanical? What ought one to do when one feels abandoned by God?

The guide or facilitator in spiritual direction helps make the process of listening to God in the presence of another less difficult, and in so doing fulfils Soloveitchik’s purpose of establishing God as one’s spiritual companion. The guide’s function is to help seekers discern the kivun (direction) of their lives, to recognize how the Source of Life may be calling them to greater meaning and growth. The spiritual director must be receptive and sensitive to his or her own interior life through prayer and meditation, since one cannot give to others that which he or she does not have. Ultimately, the guide’s role is to help nurture intimacy between the seeker and God, to guide the seeker towards feeling the “emotional pull of the Ribono Shel Olam [Master of the Universe]” which according to Soloveitchik was lacking in the modern Jew. “The Rav said that based on his own personal experience, the encounter with God is eminently possible.” It is also incumbent on the Jewish spiritual director to have professional training in theology and spiritual direction to substantively ground one’s work, in order to be accepted and recognized within Jewish communal organizations and synagogues.

126 Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified, 135.
127 Ibid.
Another essential attribute of the spiritual guide is the ability to listen.

Contemplative listening is at the heart of spiritual direction as, “We listen contemplatively for experiences of the Holy in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life.”

“We begin in silence. In the silence I go inside, quiet down, wait until I am still and fully present in the moment. With kavannah, sacred intention I open my heart to receive the other. In a sense, I attune to the other person in silence. After a time words and images come that I hope will resonate with the other person, connect to the sacred season of Jewish time we are in or to another dimension of the present moment. I speak these words as a prayer into the silence. I always express gratitude...I always ask that whatever wisdom or guidance comes from our time together helps each of us to contribute to healing, peace...the broken world. I imagine that I am connected heart to heart with the other person...and with the Source of Life. Sometimes the seeker offers a prayer. When we emerge from the silence sacred space has been created.”

The role of the spiritual director is to hold the space for the prayers of the seeker. The facilitator provides a structure that allows for listening and sharing, by honouring and supporting each person’s desire for a deeper relationship with God or the Holy. One does this through deep listening, silence, prayerful meditation, patience, knowing one’s place, a perceptive heart and humility.

“No amount of preparatory prayer or careful strategizing can guarantee that [the sessions] will be “successful.” Ordinary ways of evaluating success don’t apply. We are really talking about God’s work and we do not know enough about God’s work to evaluate it. In the end we are left to hope for an openness to God. We are left to trust that wherever two or three are gathered in a desire for openness

129 Ibid., 77
something good will happen, not only for ourselves but for our world.\textsuperscript{130}

The ancients never divided sacred and secular space and time as Jews do today. Similarly, the practice of spiritual direction tries to discern and reclaim the consciousness of the ancestors and welcome the Divine back into one’s life.\textsuperscript{131} The practice of Jewish spiritual direction allows the seeker to explore ways in which to be open to the movement of the Divine in the joyful and challenging times of one’s life.\textsuperscript{132} Lustiger writes that Soloveitchik taught,

“not only must [one] believe in Hashem, but one must feel God’s hand supporting his head during times of emotional turmoil. Potential ba’alei teshuvah[those who return to God] pine for the sublime sense of hearing Hashem’s whisper. The experience of ad Hashem [until God]* involves the very real perception of contact, communication and dialogue.”\textsuperscript{133}

Soloveitchik’s willingness to invite God into his life as a spiritual companion helped him transform his loneliness and suffering into a meaningful and gratifying experience. Likewise, the contemporary seeker, who is often skeptical, despondent and alienated from God, can find meaning and comfort in God’s presence with the help of a trained spiritual guide who can facilitate communication between the Divine and the alienated so that he or she can replicate Soloveitchik’s spiritual relationship with God.


\textsuperscript{131} Jacob J. Staub, “Jewish Theologies and Jewish Spiritual Direction” in Addison and Breitman, eds. \textit{Jewish Spiritual Direction}, 6.

\textsuperscript{132} http://www.sdiworld.org/index.pl/what_is_spiritual_direction2.html (accessed 23 March 2011).

\textsuperscript{133} Lustiger, \textit{Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified}, 135.

\* Ad Hashem means approaching [God] himself.
C. THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Soloveitchik and his disciples immersed themselves in the study of the Torah, the Talmud and the Halakhah in order to transcend suffering and be elevated towards holiness through text study and prayer. Similarly, the spiritual director must guide the seeker to discern the light shining through even in the darkest of places by means of similar texts, sacred music, contemplation, compassionate listening and dialogue. Study, observations, yearnings and obstructions are welcomed in this safe and holy place whereby the seeker is able to discern traces of the Holy in all aspects of one’s life, the sacred and mundane, looking and listening for opportunities to do the will of God.

What exactly is the practice or the process of spiritual direction? For many it can best be described as a contemplative practice through which people accompany one another over time as they reflect on their spiritual journeys and expand their awareness of the sacred dimensions that underlie the ordinary and extraordinary events of life. Through reflection, meditation, study of Jewish texts and compassionate listening and response, seekers are encouraged to cultivate penimiyut (inner lives).

The practice of spiritual direction occurs when two people sit prayerfully and reverentially in the presence of the Holy. As it states in the Talmud, “When two sit together and engage in Torah, God’s shekhinah rests upon them” (Berakhot 6a.). The director tries to listen to the seeker openly and non-judgementally. The director is not there to solve problems or act as a therapist; rather the director is there to witness the way in which the Mystery unfolds in the life of the seeker and to help the seeker discern
God’s Presence in his or her life. The Jewish spiritual director has a desire to make connections between a seeker’s actual experiences and an aspect of the Jewish tradition:

“Making connections to a particular text, liturgy, or ritual, the tradition comes alive for this person. Passages or observances that may have seemed meaningless or confusing suddenly yield their riches. Often a text [particular verse, prayer, or holiday] lends legitimacy to a feeling or experience the seeker may think is not acceptable, not spiritual, not Jewish, or even ugly or shameful.”

Avruhm Addison, a traditional rabbi and contemporary spiritual director, explains the difference between cognitive study and lived religious experience: “While I love the continuing intellectual challenge of mining Judaism’s texts for spiritual riches, it is the inner personal work that constantly proves transformative and amazing. During some very dark hours, it has been literally lifesaving.”

Torah and Shekhinah are never separated.

Classical Jewish texts offer a variety of metaphors to describe how one might derive guidance from the relationship between God and the human being. Human beings are the descendants of Jacob, who woke up at Bethel and said, “The Lord was present in this place, and I did not know it!” (Gen. 28:16). Psalm 40 speaks of coming before God with one’s deepest desires, the Talmud depicts a heavenly voice offering daily guidance on a variety of personal issues from financial to intimate to personal (Moed Katan 14b).

Even Maimonides argued forcefully that God is beyond our conception, and to say that

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134 Jacob J. Staub, “Jewish Theologies and Jewish Spiritual Direction” in Addison and Breitman, eds. Jewish Spiritual Direction, 4.
136 Avruhm Addison in Addison and Breitman, eds. Jewish Spiritual Direction, ix-x.
137 Ibid., xix
one knows anything about God is idolatrous, but what one can know about God comes indirectly through our understanding of the effects of God’s causation.

Thus all experiences and accounts of Divine-human communication, including revelation of the Torah to Moses, are sifted through the specific intellect and imagination of the human reporter and reflect more about human beings than the Divine. That is to say, one cannot know God in God self. One may only know what one discerns of God as filtered through one’s own lenses. This process is a never ending one by which one opens oneself up to God, noticing and being receptive to where God is in the array of human experiences and characteristics. This practice of discernment takes place in the realm of human experience, often a locus of mystery and paradox. Once one opens one’s heart, moments of grace, surprise and unimagined compassion and healing can open up to the genuine seeker. Relationship with a non personal God can be established because God’s presence can be experienced in deeply personal ways.\textsuperscript{138}

When Jacob awoke from his dream, and realized that he was in a place of God, his transformation was so profound that he changed his name from Jacob to Israel, the one who struggles with God (Gen. 32:25-30). Biblical stories such as Jacob’s fight with the stranger in the dark of the night, the severing of his hip from its socket and his name change are transformative stories and symbols for all who struggle whether from physical pain or psychological emotional pain. The recognition of one’s pain and suffering in the sacred stories of the tradition, of experiencing the extraordinary within the ordinary, inspire deep heartfelt connections to inexplicable longings for a past history and identity. This correlation of traditional Scripture to personal situations often occurs in silent, contemplative spiritual direction sessions where one is guided to be more open to the

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 13-18
Mystery, more devoted to meditation, prayer and study, and more aware and accepting of the changes that are happening in one’s life. In these profound moments one becomes aware of the potential for strength, hope and redemption in one’s life.

Soloveitchik referred to this movement from suffering to an elevated understanding of one’s relationship to God, *Torah* and to the meaning of the tradition as the redemptive experience of suffering. God reveals God’s self in the whirlwind of catastrophe and human beings must be sensitive to God’s messages.\(^{139}\) In other words, in confronting God on this plane, humans must know how to interpret the message of suffering and prayer. A spiritual director who is mindful and knowledgeable in the tradition and in a theology such as Soloveitchik’s can be of great assistance to the seeker, and can dispel the ambivalence of a potential seeker who on first glance might find the idea of contemporary spiritual practice to be irrelevant.

Using the tradition and Soloveitchik’s teachings as a foundation, I have been engaged in leading a Jewish spiritual direction group for the past six years which gathers in a sacred community to share the same spiritual and religious language. We are ten people: eight Jewish women, one Christian woman and one Jewish man, ranging in age from thirty to seventy-five. We meet once a month for approximately two hours. We begin each session with a silent prayer, the lighting and blessing of a candle, and our *kavannah* (intention) is set as we acknowledge God’s presence and God’s role in each of our lives. We enter into silent meditation for anywhere from five to forty five minutes. I often incorporate relevant Jewish texts and teachings from the tradition. Since we usually begin each year in the reflective month of *Elul* and then move into *Rosh Hashana* towards *Yom Kippur*, it is a rich time to begin such profound holy and inner work. We

\(^{139}\) Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind*, xxxvii.
move from silence to study to conversation to niggunim (wordless melodies) to prayer to deep listening and back into silence. Our discussions and prayers which are God centred and offered within a spiritual community have a profound effect. As it says in the Zohar (Kabbalistic commentary),

“All the prayers of the world are considered prayers, but the prayer of an individual enters before the Holy One only with intense effort. Because before that prayer enters to be crowned, the Blessed Holy One examines and inspects it, scrutinizing it: With what heart and intention is it offered?—which the Holy One does not do for the prayer of a spiritual community. For look, a prayer of the spiritual community includes many prayers of those who are not virtuous, and yet they all enter the Presence of the Holy One without turning over their virtues.” Although all prayers offered sincerely are legitimate, the prayers in a spiritual community ascend more easily, without meticulous inspection. “Therefore one should offer one’s prayer in a spiritual community because ‘The Holy One has not spurned their prayer’ (Psalms 102:18) even though they have not all been offered with devotion and heartfelt intention (kavannah)” (Zohar I: 234a).140

Among the members of the group there have been the human experiences of suffering illness, death, marital struggle and divorce, and so I have introduced the misheberach (prayer for healing), the kaddish (prayer for death and mourning), and prayers for peace. We pray for one another and those around us whom we know and do not know. Friendship, community, loving kindness, trust, humility, tears and joy, and most of all the longing to talk about God and the acceptance of God’s presence in each and every soul within a spiritual community is sustaining and significant.

“...people often become aware of God’s ways in their hearts as they hear how God seems to be present for others and as they become conscious of God’s presence with them as a group. God breaks open the

tiny vessels they each have built to contain God. They come to expect God in surprising places in their lives and the lives of others...Thus there is a collective wisdom available for each person...People share a commitment to be there for each other in their desire for God. In the group they make their shared desire explicit. They hold one another in the prayer of their desire.”

The spiritual direction practice is grounded in Mystery. The silence, the sharing, the silence again and then the response from the group honours and supports this sacred foundation. The repetition of the process, the reflection and the silence maintain a bond even when the group loses sight of the Mystery or the purpose of the process. As Carolyn Gratton, psychologist and professor of spirituality at Duquesne’s Institute for Formative Spirituality, states,

“Unless we are grounded in Mystery-unless we experience both ourselves and others as co-participants in Mystery- we find it almost impossible to live in compassionate love of one another for any length of time. Unless we have ‘new eyes’ that can see the others contemplatively, it is easy to miss the many-splendoured thing that is our life together.”

Prayerful silence nurtures discernment in group spiritual direction just as it does in one-on-one spiritual direction. The purpose of spiritual direction is to enable each person to develop a greater awareness of and bring expression to his or her unique experience of the Holy. The theologian, David R. Blumenthal writes,

“[I]n developing a way to talk about God, it is the vocabulary of the realm of religious language and experience that must be primary; it is also necessary to state that...language about God begins in the

142 Ibid., 35
143 Carolyn Gratton as cited in Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 35.
ineffable but includes other universes of discourse: the moral, the rational, and the aesthetic.”

Lustiger writes that in Soloveitchik’s opinion, “The command of cleaving to Him” is an imperative that can only be realized when one feels His presence and stands lifnei Hashem [before God].” The art of spiritual direction is to find new ways, within the ancient tradition to engage the modern seeker to ‘stand before God,’ to communicate with God, and to deepen one’s love, trust and acceptance of the Divine presence. In this group, I have integrated Soloveitchik’s thought with the specific focus of keeping God at the centre of all our experiences and discussions.

D. THE SIDDUR (TRADITIONAL JEWISH PRAYER BOOK) AS A HANDBOOK FOR THE PRACTICE OF JEWISH MEDITATION

Soloveitchik writes that “the fulfillment of prayer, its kiyum [very existence] is subjective: it is the service of the heart.” Like Hasidism which placed so much emphasis on the heart, on the spiritual element, on the subjectivity of prayer, and on the individual coming closer to God through prayer, Soloveitchik sustained this all encompassing view of prayer of the heart and of set prayer as a central element in Jewish thought. Since prayer is the covenantal bond that creates the relationship between human beings and God, it must also play a central role in guiding today’s seeker in the spiritual practice of meditation.

In the large body of Jewish classical texts, there is no single work consciously written as a handbook for the practice of Jewish meditation. However, the one basic

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145 Lustiger, Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified, 136.

146 Soloveitchik, Worship of the Heart, 147.
Jewish manual that represents the Jewish people’s collective expression of the universal yearning for God, and that is the clearest expression of Soloveitchik’s ideal of prayer as service of the heart in cultivating a relationship with God is the *Siddur*. It is a daily guide for all Jews seeking a deepened awareness of the Divine presence. It is a resource for prayer texts that help deepen and ground spiritual work in a Jewish context as it teaches the cultivation of qualities of soul, such as reverence, humility, radical trust, attentiveness to God and openness to Divine guidance.¹⁴⁷ These guidelines are extremely helpful to directors and seekers alike. Private prayer, communal prayer, the *Shema* and its blessings, psalms, the *Amidah*, petition, prayer in praise of God, prayer in gratitude to God, prayers for healing, prayers for mourning and prayers for peace all form the *keva* (structured liturgy) of the *Siddur*.

Prayer provides seekers with a rich tapestry of theological reflection on the bond between oneself and God. Prayers in the *siddur* provide texts for meditation on the individual’s experience within the collective Jewish context. Prayer provides divine guidance for the director to serve as God’s vessel, and prayer is a guide for the seeker to find the many ways in which the Divine may manifest in human life. Prayer opens one to approach life in living companionship with God.¹⁴⁸

True prayer is about taking the time to acknowledge that one lives in God’s abode. Prayer is about listening as much as it is about speaking. As the innermost self, really the Self of God within us, makes itself manifest to us, it must reach and travel through all of our most vulnerable and wounded places. To do so prayer needs its own language that touches one most deeply, so that its language may reach a person where he

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¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 198-207
or she hurts and where one feels true joy. As Arthur Green, theologian and Rector of Rabbinical School, Hebrew College Boston, puts it,

“Prayer heals the one who prays, restoring a wholeness or a balance that can be lost when we are beset by concern or worry...And since the One who lies within us, to whom we give the words of prayer, lies as well within the heart of the one for whom we pray, we would indeed be setting false and unnecessary limits to say that the energy of our love, expressed in that prayer, cannot reach the other.”

One must open one’s heart through spontaneous prayer: words that flow directly from the heart in response to the events of one’s life.

“Shema Yisrael, YHVH Eloheinu, YHVH echad - Hear Israel, YHVH is Our God, YHVH is One” is not only central to Jewish prayer and faith, but “declares that hearing is the quintessentially sacred act for Jews.” This prayer in which God’s name is ineffable calls for a God who can somehow be “heard” in the silence. Such a prayer is fundamental to the reverent and receptive devotion with which one practices meditation. Not only does one hear sounds with one’s ears, but one hears with one’s heart, the lev shomea, the “hearing heart” (I Kings 3:9).

Soloveitchik writes, “It [prayer] is the expression of the soul that yearns for God via the medium of the word, through which the human being gives expression to the storminess of his soul and spirit.” After all it was the Torah that commanded prayer as the “exclusive medium for expressing inward worship.” The tradition was always interested in expressions of the inner life and in turning emotional turmoil into action.

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149 Arthur Green, Ehyeh A Kabbalah for Tomorrow, (Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2003), 156.
150 Barbara Eve Breitman, “Holy Listening: Cultivating a Hearing Heart” in Addison and Breitman, eds. Jewish Spiritual Direction, 73.
151 Ibid.
152 Joseph Soloveitchik, Worship of the Heart, 146.
153 Ibid.
Soloveitchik states that it was Maimonides who ordained that prayer is Biblical and identical with the service of the heart, and in so doing he gave voice to love, to fear, and to all the aspects of the religious life without which the human soul could not be nourished. For today’s seeker then prayer, too, is the life blood and it must be sustained in all of its multi-coloured forms and expressions, one of which can be found in the practice of Jewish meditation.

E. TECHNIQUES OF JEWISH MEDITATION

Meditation is described in much of the literature as contemplative, that is, to forget one self, to have one’s ego recede into the background and to invite or to allow God’s presence into the foreground. This contemplative or meditative approach is not foreign to Judaism. The sacred Biblical obligation to “love the Eternal one, God and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 10: 12-13) is an obligation to put God at the centre and to live out this love in the world at all times. As Soloveitchik stressed, prayer is “the mirror that reflects the soul of the worshipper who is totally and perpetually committed to God...Prayer was established to correspond to the sacrifice of man to God...Man must discover the great privilege of coming before God outside the sanctuary, in the struggle of existence.”

Meditation practices allow for an opportunity to cultivate and create new prayers and benedictions with a kavannah that is intentionally focussed on God’s presence. In listening and creating prayers together one may incorporate traditional prayers from the liturgy, or one may write prayers in the form of kvittelach (notes) that women,

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154 Ibid., 147
155 Ibid., 165-166
traditionally, carried in their pockets, or in their heads and hearts for contemplation, visualization, or as mantras for focus and chanting. Meditation techniques include: the need for time alone, breathing exercises, bodily movements, centering prayer, niggunim (wordless melodies), reciting a sacred phrase with the breath, visualization and verbally chanting or singing the Divine Names.

Green describes the concept of hitbodedut, “making yourself alone” to be with God, as a basic daily spiritual practice recommended by many hasidic rabbis. Green explains how Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810), the renowned spiritual leader of Hasidism, taught that this lone daily conversation with God is considered to be the greatest spiritual practice and most essential religious practice. This practice was to be placed above all else in one’s hierarchy of values. Each person is to have a daily heart-rending personal conversation with God, pouring out all one’s burdens and also one’s gratitude before God. One must speak to God at length about everything that is going on in one’s life. One must speak to God freely as if one were speaking to a very close friend. This is what Moses and Abraham did. The effects of hitbodedut are like drops of water falling upon a stone. Eventually the stone will be worn away; the ‘heart of stone’ is to be worn away by constant supplication and one will be ready to respond even to the slightest knock on the door of one’s heart. As cited by Green, Rebbe Nachman claimed that there was nothing as whole as a broken heart,

“I have been told he said that no person, whether great or small, could do what he truly must except by means of hitbodedut. He mentioned various true and well known zaddiqim [righteous men], saying that each one of them had attained to his rung only in this way. He also made mention of a certain simple man from among the BeSHT’s [Baal Shem Tov] descendants, saying that he, too, regularly poured out his words amidst great tears. The family of the
BeSHT, he said, were especially accustomed to this, since they were of the Davidic house, and David’s only concern was that he break his heart before the Lord always. This too is the origin of David’s psalms.”

The core of religion lies in the inner life of the individual and in the outpourings of one’s innermost thoughts before God. The struggle to be near to God and the need to break one’s heart in order to do so are the very essence of religion. The therapeutic or redemptive technique that Rebbe Nahman taught was one born of his own experience in constant outcry to God from the midst of his struggles much like the moving experiences described by Soloveitchik in the previous chapters of his own sufferings and near death experiences when he too came face to face with God.

Zari Weiss describes the concept of hitbonenut (contemplation), attributed to the twentieth century rabbi and Jewish meditation teacher, Aryeh Kaplan, as a means to gaze and stare at something, either visually or mentally, until one understands it thoroughly, “Contemplate the wonders of God” (Job. 37:14) and “Contemplate the love of God” (Ps. 107:43). Weiss adds how Maimonides and Nahmanides, medieval philosophers and rationalists, both taught that such a state of contemplation allows one to realize his or her own minuteness relative to the magnificence of the Great Mystery of the Divine where ego recedes and the “abode of the Shekhinah” comes to the forefront.

When one is able to stay still, settle one’s thoughts and quiet the mind, one is able to put oneself in a larger context which enables an encounter with God. Shapiro explains that in the Talmud, Berakhot 5:1 states that the early Hasidim would “be still one hour prior to each of the three daily prayer services, and direct [their] mind to The Place

156 Arthur Green, Tormented Master (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1992), 145-146.
“(God).” They would empty their minds of the things of this world and bind themselves to God with awe and love. They would visualize the Light of the Divine Presence, Shekhinah, resting on top of their heads. Then they would imagine that this Light was flowing down and spreading around them and through them, and they would sit in the Light and tremble from their awe. And they would also rejoice at this awe that came on them. Thoughts and feelings may arise of their own accord, but in meditation one tries not to dwell upon or follow those thoughts. Then the mind slowly ceases its activity; a deep quiet emerges and there is a profound knowing.158

Breathing techniques were also a spiritual tool. Moshe Idel cites Abulafia, the medieval Kabbalist, who stated:

“One must take each of the Divine Names and wave it with the movements of his long breath. One does not breathe between two Divine Names, but rather one long breath, for however long he can stand it, and afterwards rest for the length of one breath. He shall do the same with each Divine Name, until there will be two breaths for each Name. One breath for pausing when he enunciates the Name, and one breath for resting between each Name.”159

This slow paced breath allows one to attain the attribute of Gevurah, strength, meaning that a person has the ability to overcome his or her urge to do unwholesome actions; one may conquer one’s evil urges by means of proper breathing techniques.160 Abulafia continued by suggesting that one must, “Take 18 breaths, which will add years of life, which are Hai, meaning “Life-Energy, Life-Force of the soul. Hai also in gematria is 18. … Your two nostrils are the chariots which force the Shekhinah to dwell on earth and

160 Ibid.
The 18 breaths are the changers of one’s vitality; they give one a vitality of the soul. This suggests the ability of the breath to bring about a spiritual experience. There are two aspects of the breath, that of overcoming illness of the body and of strengthening spirituality. Prayer and meditation used in this way can implant and reinforce spiritual wholesome behaviors.

To breathe is to praise God since each breath one takes is a gift of the Source of Life, “Let every soul/all that breathes praise God” (Ps.150:6). And “God breathed into the human being the breath of aliveness” (Gen. 2:7). For this breath of life one gives prayers of thanks every morning: “Elohai neshama: My God/ The soul You have given me is pure/You created and formed it/You breathed it into me and watch over it with care./So long as my soul remains within me/ I shall give thanks to You and praise You.” In Hebrew the words nishimah (breath) and neshamah (soul) share the same root. The soul is the breath conscious of itself as a divine gift. One may use the breath in one’s work as a spiritual guide or when meditating to direct Divine breath to come into contact with the soul just as God breathed the breath of life into Adam. The quality of breath, and one’s prayers or meditations have an impact on and reflect the quality of one’s soul. To make the inner life more accessible to the modern seeker, Green and Holtz translate this contemplative Hasidic prayer as follows,

\[
\text{If prayer is pure and untainted,} \\
\text{Surely that holy breath} \\
\text{That rises from your lips} \\
\text{Will join with the breath of heaven} \\
\text{That is always flowing}
\]

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161 Abulafia, Hayye ha-Olam Ha-Ba, as quoted in Moshe Idel, The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia, 24-28.
162 Greenberg, Moshe, Greenfield, Jonas, Sarna, Nahum eds., The Book of Psalms, 176.
Into you from above.
Thus our masters have taught the verse
“Every breath shall praise God”
with every single breath you breathe,
God is praised.
As the breath leaves you, it ascends to God,
And then it returns to you from above.
Thus that part of God which is within you
Is reunited with its source.¹⁶⁴

The various techniques described above or kavannot (intentions) cannot be
equated with ordinary intention. Soloveitchik says that this inward turning toward God is
of utmost significance. He states that such intention “is rather identical with meditation,
spiritual surrender, or the turning and directing of the heart unto the Lord. For it is the
heart, and not the lips, which is called upon to turn toward God in the morning and in the
evening.”¹⁶⁵

Such meaningful practices may fill the seeker with an all-embracing and all-penetrating experience of God. Cultivating the contemplative life through silence and
compassionate listening, being receptive and open to what emerges in the silence is not
about focusing on one self, but meditating in a complete turning of the heart toward
God.¹⁶⁶ A minority of Jews throughout time have chosen to live isolated lives in
contemplation and meditation, but for today’s Jews living contemplative lives means to
be fully engaged in the world while having one’s heart and soul attached to God through
prayer and the practice of meditation.

¹⁶⁴ Arthur Green and Barry W. Holtz, eds., Your Word is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative
¹⁶⁵ Soloveitchik, Worship of the Heart, 89.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 70
F. INCORPORATING SACRED TIME INTO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

As Soloveitchik recounted in his teachings and from his personal life experiences, truly living and understanding the Sabbath or the Passover mitzvot and rituals formed the essence of his religious world view and philosophy. He described that to experience and to know the freedom of the Sabbath and the freedom of Passover is to enter into an enormous world that transforms one from the dry confines of the law to the heartfelt worship of God. Similarly, contemporary practices in spiritual direction and meditation encourage liberation through opening one’s heart to God of one’s own free will and in turn God accepts the invitation and draws close.

Engaging and nurturing the seeker in contemporary practices that place God and Judaism at the centre of one’s life means attuning one’s inner rhythms to the cycles of sacred time through holy days, festivals and the study of sacred texts. Integrating one’s own soul story with the story of one’s people is valuable to the growing soul. Each Shabbat, each new month, each holy festival calls on the soul to respond to the pulse of the Divine, and to open up to new possibilities from danger and destruction to forgiveness and freedom to rest and renewal.167

The Sabbath is the quintessential spiritual practice. Shabbat arrives weekly, late Friday afternoon. Can one take off twenty four hours and not be too worried that he or she will not get things done? Can one go without shopping, driving, spending money, without email, without television or the telephone? Which of one’s innumerable habits can he or she let go? Can one allow Creation to feed us for one day? What would it be like to remember one’s Source of destiny, to purify one’s heart through sacred time and

space, and to feel blessed? One celebrates with family, friends, a meal, welcoming in the Sabbath bride with prayer, devotion and songs of praise. Jewish religious life is anchored in establishing meaning and peacefulness in connection to God and to other people. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes,

“Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time…Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year… The Sabbath is not determined by any event in nature, such as the new moon, but by the act of creation. The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time…from the results of creation to the mystery of creation…”

In her essay, “Keeping the Sabbath,” Dorothy Bass observes that in Deuteronomy the commandment to observe the Sabbath day is tied to the experience of a people newly released from bondage. Slaves cannot take a day off; free people can.

In a spiritual direction or meditation session one contemplates whether one may find the Sabbath within to free one’s soul from the slavery of the material world.

Accordingly, the laws of the story of the Exodus from Egypt command that “in every generation a person is obligated to see him or herself as if he or she personally left Egypt.” To the children of Israel, the unique events of historic time were spiritually more significant than the repetitive processes in the cycle of nature; the God of Israel was the God of events. Thus Passover, originally a spring festival, was transformed from an agricultural celebration into the celebration of renewal and the Exodus from

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Egypt. The Bible pays more attention to events, to history. In other words, time is holy and has significance like no other. And so it is that on Passover, God reveals God’s self to human beings as the ultimate liberating power, bringing the people out of Mitsrayim (Egypt) the narrow straits, and on to Sinai to forge a covenant with the Jewish people as a nation.

The Exodus from Egypt is one of the greatest tales of human history. The text one chants on Passover is called the Haggadah (the Telling). At the Pesach Seder, one is asked to retell the tale, to enlarge on the tale as a personal reliving of slavery and liberation. One is invited to re-enter, re-enact and expand upon the telling until one’s life and this narrative become inextricably intertwined. Such stories and questions may easily find their way into the practice of spiritual direction for both director and directee, and may be used in the public practice of the Passover ritual, or in the private practice of a meditation session.

What forces now imprison one? Where does one imagine he or she is powerless? How does one become enslaved to false ideas, or alienated from our true selves? Where is one puffed up and arrogant? How is one suffering or causing others to suffer? What old fears and insecurities might one need to rinse away? What does one need to feel full and fulfilled? How might one broaden one’s perspectives by acknowledging that sometimes one sees one’s life through the narrowest and most constrictive of lenses? What calls for repair? What process of inner cleansing needs to take place? Each ritual at the Seder table brings forth the possibilities of new birth, the

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shedding of old paradigms and liberating possibilities. Soloveitchik teaches that there is only one way for a human being to truly free oneself from all restrictions, fears and phobias, and that is to surrender oneself to God and to fear God:

“If we had been taken out of Egypt without Elokeinu (our God), without accepting His code, without surrendering to His authority, without reaching a covenant with Him, without obligating ourselves to surrender freedom in order to gain a higher form of freedom then we would have been in bondage again. Instead of bondage to Pharaoh, it would have been bondage to our own fears, to our own phobias, to nature, to society, to slogans. On Passover, we celebrate our freedom.”

There is no place devoid of the Presence, and one’s spiritual work is to grow and to seek to live in God’s House. One searches in direct encounter, in nature, through human relationship, community, study, ritual, prayer, and Jewish time and space. One searches inward, upward and outward to deepen one’s sense of the sacred. One’s best access to the Holy may be in entering deeply into his or her own essence, deep into the Sanctuary where Spirit dwells, ultimately to reclaim one’s freedom. In this ongoing search and exploration of the Holy Presence in a person’s life, one may come to recognize moments when, like our forefather Jacob, one is awakened from a deep slumber to discover with clarity that ‘Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!’ (Gen 28:16).

In this last chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how Soloveitchik’s theology of suffering and redemption and prayer can be used in relationship with the contemporary practices of spiritual direction and meditation. Such an approach enables the journey of the soul and brings greater depth, meaning and insight to those who seek spiritual

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172 Ibid., 224

173 Soloveitchik, The Seder Night, 35.
nourishment and closeness to God within the challenges of the contemporary world.

One of the primary ways to heal the suffering soul is through deepening our relationship with God, and this can be achieved through these spiritual practices that are based in knowledge, understanding and love of the fullness of the Jewish tradition and the theology as taught by Soloveitchik.
CONCLUSION

At the end of *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Soloveitchik tells the story of Elisha the son of *Shafat*, in I Kings, 19: 19-21. While Elisha is engaged in the most mundane activity of tilling the soil, he encounters God and feels the transforming touch of God’s hand. A new Elisha emerges. He withdraws from society, from family relationships and enters into a covenantal relationship with God, becoming a messenger of God. He later returns to society and participates in state affairs as adviser of kings and teacher of the community, but he is a changed person. Often his words are rejected as human beings are disenchanted, yet he never despairs or resigns. He finds hope in failure and triumph in defeat. Elisha like Moses was God’s messenger.

“Despair and resignation were unknown to the man of the covenant who found triumph in defeat, hope in failure, and who could not conceal God’s word...that was deeply implanted in his bones and burning in his heart like an all-consuming fire. Elisha was indeed lonely, but in his loneliness he met the Lonely One and discovered the singular covenantal confrontation of solitary man and God who abides in the recesses of transcendental solitude.”¹⁷⁴

Like the Biblical figure of Elisha, the modern person of faith is entitled to the same privileged position and when he or she recognizes that in the existential loneliness and predictability of one’s daily life he or she is never truly alone, one feels liberated and whole. It is the duty of the modern person of faith to cultivate and share in what Soloveitchik refers to as the ‘covenantal drama’ by aspiring to do God’s will and to discern God’s role in one’s life.¹⁷⁵

Soloveitchik teaches that, “...the religious experience is fraught with inner conflicts and incongruities; the man of faith oscillates between ecstasy in God’s

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 112
companionship and despair when he feels abandoned by God...”

Cathartic redemption can only be discovered in the depth of crisis and failure; it can only be achieved in the privacy of one’s in-depth personality, and through self-discipline. “Therefore the man of faith, in order to redeem himself from his loneliness and misery, must meet God at a personal, covenantal level, where he can be near Him and feel free in His presence.”

The dilemmas for the contemporary Jew have not changed, nor can they be solved, but by confessing and speaking out to God one may be able to yield a better understanding and some relief for one’s agitation. In humbling oneself and allowing oneself to be confronted by a Higher Being, one begins to achieve redemption, catharsis, and relief from the loneliness. Despite much resistance, especially from progressive Jewish communities, opening up to the theology of Soloveitchik can assist contemporary Jews, torn between a traditional understanding of Judaism and the world of secularity and modernity, not to abandon traditional Jewish thinking but rather to embrace the type of thought that Soloveitchik advances.

As a result of this study I hope to have shown that Soloveitchik’s teachings on suffering and prayer illustrate a profoundly meaningful path that supports the contemporary spiritual seeker’s endeavour to find salvation from his or her anguish. Soloveitchik, himself, lamented the shortcomings of modern religious life even within his own traditional community. He assigned blame to three negative factors that suffused the religious atmosphere: superficial utilitarianism, vulgar ceremonial pomp.

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176 Ibid., 2
177 Ibid., 49-50
within the *halakha*, and the lack of serious capacity for introspection and examination of world and self.\(^{178}\)

It is evident that in routine there is sanctity and great dignity which can be achieved outside of the strict *halakhic* system. The *halakha* is not more important than an internalization of the potency of the routine of spiritual practices together with sufficient learning of the great ideas of the tradition. Soloveitchik would often teach that the *Halakhah*, in the narrow sense of the term, “provides a ground floor for ethical growth, not a ceiling. The aspiration for a holy and wholesome life entails going beyond legalism, and requires the student be attached to those who have internalized *Torah*, and that he emulate them.”\(^{179}\) With awe and humility one can appreciate that Soloveitchik - the brilliant legalist, intellectual and philosopher, in times of great vulnerability did not look for understanding and comfort in the world of the head alone, but like today’s tormented seeker he too searched for solace in that place deep in the heart where God resides.

Soloveitchik’s suffering came out of the Holocaust experience which he internalized and only expressed through nuance and subtlety. Most of his writings do not directly address the subject, yet the understood silence speaks loudly. There is tremendous angst in the silence, and one could argue that his writings explore the silent scream of the heart as opposed to the rationality of the intellect. Likewise, in contemporary spirituality there is a silent angst that arises from a very different place: either a place of boredom with individuality, or on the other hand a frustration with the collectivization of mainstream religion, or fatigue with mechanical and

\(^{179}\) Ibid., 3-5
meaningless, cerebral activity. This same silence motivates the individual to move away from the head to seek out the heart; it is the heart that heals.

For both the traditional rationalist and the contemporary seeker, the longing for God is the constant. The religious toolbox with all of its spiritual practices—ritual, prayer, song, meditation, spiritual direction, study of Torah and the Halakhah—is solid and unvarying. Soloveitchik knew that it is much easier to teach the quantifiable external elements in halakhic behaviour than it is to evoke the inner feeling that ought to accompany prayer or the sanctity of religious ritual. Like all generations, today’s modern person is vulnerable, and in times of restlessness and chaos one often seeks and needs order and stability.

Soloveitchik’s teachings are a theological resource which strengthen and deepen Jewish spiritual practice. His is a theology that forms the foundation from which one can lift oneself up to make meaning of one’s life. Living mindfully, surrounded by God’s presence within the framework of traditional ideas can provide reassurance and protection. As the psalmist recites, God is a beacon of reliability, “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in mortals” (Ps. 118: 8). Physical redemption from despair and disquiet cannot proceed without the spiritual. When something is hidden, it is not lost forever. God may turn away and humans may turn away, but life is about getting back to face God through Jewish living. Regular study of Torah, customary rituals of prayer and mutual deeds of obligation enhanced by the discipline of introspective, spiritual practices provide purpose, transforming despair

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into joy and denigration into affirmation.\textsuperscript{181} This thesis is dedicated to Soloveitchik’s teachings in that they are a profoundly relevant source for all who wish to bind traditional theological practice with contemporary spiritual practice in the search for restoration, wholeness, meaning and a “piety dedicated to truth.”\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{181} John Moscowitz, “Why Soloveitchik Matters,” Lecture (Toronto, Canada: Holy Blossom Temple, April 27, 2009.)

\textsuperscript{182} Shalom Carmy, “The Words of the Master and the Life of the Student,” 3.
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Other Works


