

The Ethical-Moral Side of Religious Judaism

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The approach of Judaism to the world and to nature. How does Halacha view science and spirituality.

Question: In a previous article you noted that prayer is one of the oldest institutions in Judaism. Can you tell us, if in addition to the religious meaning, Tfila also has an ethical-moral value that can be appreciated even by one who is not observant?

Answer: Tfila is tightly connected to Kriat Shma. In the morning and evening prayers, a Jew must organize his recitation of Kriat Shma with its associated blessings and immediately afterwards begin to recite the Shmoneh Esray, the Amidah. This binding of Kriat Shma and Shmoneh Esray in Halachic parlance is referred to as *סמיכת גאולה לתפלה*, juxtaposing the redemption (as stated in the blessing preceding Shmoneh Esray) and Tfila (Shmoneh Esray). We also know that the main motif of Kriat Shma and its associated blessings is the unification of the name of God - *יחוד השם*. The clearest expression of this theme can be seen in the very first verse of the Shma: *שמע ישראל ד' אלקינו ד' אחד*. The conclusion from these two axioms is simple: the concept of unification of the name of God is a central theme also in Tfila. Shmoneh Esray is directly connected to Kriat Shma as both have something in common - *יחוד השם* - and therefore the Halacha requires that they flow together in a single religious event.

What is *יחוד השם*? What does the verse of *שמע ישראל*, the verse that has been transformed into the motto of our faith, the phrase that defines that which is amazing and unique about Judaism, tell us? If we were to understand the *שמע ישראל*, the principle of *יחוד השם*, we would be prepared to lay the foundation for the meaning and essence of Tfila.

השם demonstrates faith in מציאות השם, the existence of God as the sole eternal being, creator and director of the universe. Maimonides formulated this principle immediately at the beginning of his great work, the משנה תורה:

יסוד היסודות ועמוד ההנראות לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון ממציא לכל הנמצאים וכל הנמצאים בשמים ובארץ וביניהם לא נבראו אלא וכו' אלקי העולם אדון כל הארץ והוא אחד ולא שנים (הלכות יסודי התורה א:א)

A Jew must believe and attempt to understand and feel with his entire soul, that the will of the Almighty, Creator of the universe, is realized in every event of nature, in the biological, organic and inorganic realms. His infinite, all-powerful and eternal plan manifests itself in the mathematical laws, measures and necessities that are all around us and that we commonly refer to as a law of nature. The diffusion of light, the blowing of the wind, the ocean waves rolling in, ships sailing, birds flying, insects swarming, trees blossoming in the garden, blood circulates in a body, the nervous system functions, the planets maintain their orbit, stars explode in the furthest reaches of the galaxy, etc. All these wonderful processes of nature uphold and express the word of God, Who once split the nihility of existence (תהו ובהו) and brought forth a well ordered and well organized universe: the word “יהי”. The true יחיד, God, can be found in everything, over everything and through everything; His will has been injected into the inanimate, that which grows, that which lives, and all these things fulfill blindly, mechanically, His command of “יהי”.

However, this same will of God is also active in the spiritual personality of mankind, in man's thoughts and moral reputation, in his yearning for beauty and productivity, in his dreams regarding sanctity and a better world. The will of God, which expresses itself as a constant mechanical event such as the flowing of the waters of the sea, also reveals itself to mankind in his greatest moments of ethical ascent and exhausts him in times of ethical downfall. The “יהי” from the time of creation of the universe, and the “אנכי” that was spoken at Mount Sinai, are revelations and aspects of the same eternal will of God.

When a Jew bangs on the heavenly gates in the Fall Slichot period, or in the mysterious, holy and kindness-enveloped night of Yom Kippur (night כל נדרי), he first proclaims his belief in יהוה השם and the יהוה הרצון of God, the divine will of God, in the natural universe as well as the spiritual and ethical realm. This is expressed by the heartfelt muttering of the congregation and the celebratory recitation of the Chazan:

לך שמים אף לך ארץ ומלואה אתה יסדתם אתה הצבת כל גבולות ארץ, קיץ וחורף אתה יצרתם. אתה בקעת מעין ונחל... אתה פוררת בעוזך ים שברת תנינים על המים: אתה מושל בגאות הים בשוא גליו אתה תשבחם

Observe the Slichot Jew through the window and see how the eastern horizon starts to lighten, how it kindles the sky with blood-red flames of a rising sun, how the entire landscape is drenched with purple and gold. Observe the Yom Kippur Jew through the window in the in encroaching darkness of the holiest of evenings and see how the light of the new moon illuminates the Shul Bima with its pale light, the trees visible outside the synagogue windows that moved to and fro (“shuckled”) with so many Jews during their prayers throughout the years. How it weaves a silver web over houses and gardens that are resting on the Yom Kippur day, the שבת שבתון. The Jew, be it in the early morning Slichot prayer or Kol Nidrei night, thinks to himself: observe the rays of light, be they the golden light of the sun or the silver light of the moon, fulfill the same will of God that every Jew wishes to fulfill and develop - the will of God that rages and resides within each of us. And he exclaims with great emotion and fervor “לכו נרננה לד' נריעה לצור ישענו.. צדק ומשפט”. “מכון כסאיד חסד ואמת יקדמו פניך... אשר יחדו נמתיק סוד בבית אלקים נהלך ברגש”. The emphasis is placed on the word “אתה”, on the possessive “ך” (letter Kof): everything is You, God, only You and everywhere You. You are revealed in every aspect and event of nature and in all the yearnings and accomplishments of mankind. Immediately (and only) after this declaration of the unity of the Will of God, nature and the personality of mankind, the Jew begins to say Slichot, the 13 attributes of God, confession, ויודי, and starts to beseech and cling to the Creator.

The blessings of Kriat Shma and the Shmoneh Esray express this motif very clearly and succinctly. What is the essence of the blessing of “יוצר אור”, if not the

beautiful song of **ברכי נפשי את ד'. ד' אלקי גדלת מאד**, if not the extolling of the divine revelation through and in nature, from its tiniest to its greatest dimensions we proclaim **"מה רבו מעשיך ד' כולם בחכמה עשית מלאה הארץ קנייך"** and in the ethical-moral world order expressed in **"זורע צדקות מצמיח ישועות בורא רפואות"**! What does the blessing of **גבורות** we recite in Shmoneh Esray mean if not to underscore the fundamental idea that the will of God is etched in stone and metal, in the animal and insect kingdoms, in the ray of light and the blooming rose, as we say **"אתה גבור"** while at the same time that will is expressed in the ethical-moral realm through the words **"מכלכל חיים בחסד... סומך נופלים ורופא חולים ומתיר אסורים"**!

Yes, Kriat Shma and Tfila rest on the ancient Jewish belief that to be upstanding and to live in accordance with morality is just as natural and straightforward as for the Maple tree to cover itself with white leaves in the spring and for the bird to jump from branch to branch. A single, consistent will of God is evident in the mechanical blossoming of the drive of nature and in humanity's conscious search for the good and exalted.

However, **יהוד השם**, whether it be in its positive form as an expression of faith and unity of the will of God, or whether it be in the negative sense as a prohibition and restraint against idolatry, contains within it more than just a positive commandment of **אנכי ד' אלקיך**, or a negative commandment of **לא יהיה לך** in relation to a subjective belief in a theoretical-philosophical approach to nature and mankind. **יהוד השם** entails a practical program, a **שולחן ערוך**, a code of law, which encompasses all aspects and phases of our life, in both the private/intimate and public/social arenas. If the modern person, Jew and Gentile, would accept this very useful weltanschauung, he would not have to suffer through all his fright and madness.

יהוד השם demands from a person that he approach all situations and people with a relativistic measurement. He should evaluate them only from the social-historical perspective, not in absolute or permanent terms, and as not completely truthful. Only One is absolute and eternal. Only One cannot be influenced through any power or ability. Only One is complete truth, righteousness and kindness. The first and the last, the source and purpose of all - and that One is God. Everything else is

temporary and fleeting (no matter how long that object may exist), worthless and empty. If, for example, a Jew does not understand this principle and he is enraptured and overcome with admiration for some object, ascribing to it more value than it deserves, he becomes an idolator. A Jew can recite the 13 articles of faith (אני מאמין) daily, study the Zohar and observe all the commandments with equivalent care. If he is devoted to something that is manufactured or created and ascribes to it trust, a trust that must be ascribed only to God, he violates the commandments of לא יהי-ה and אנכי.

Judaism does not prohibit one from expressing love and care to God's creations as long as he recognizes that all that he holds in high regard is imperfect, and therefore his feelings of love and admiration for these objects must also be incomplete. He must always be cognizant that he can give over his entire heart, his full emotions and all he possesses only to God. ואהבת את ד' אלקיך הכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודיך. We must love and exalt God with unlimited love in our heart, that which Halacha refers to as עבודה שבלב. We may not worship human beings or their creations. It is therefore forbidden to inflate and embellish the intensity of the feelings of love towards them.

Let us illustrate this thesis. Judaism has always preached that man should employ his mental capabilities and attempt to understand nature scientifically when encountering the forces of nature that surround him yet in which he is very seldom a participant. No other religion has elevated the intellect as Judaism has. Most Jewish philosophers identified human intelligence with צלם אלקים, the image of God. The Halacha, which encompasses our entire existence, all contradictions and all our experiences, constantly strives to understand science in order to apply Torah Law. There is not a single area of human knowledge - from metaphysical philosophy to the practical-technical - that does not interest the Halacha. In this regard, the Halacha has formulated the most progressive and liberal weltanschauung. While other faiths emphasized only the spiritual aspect that causes objects to grow, the Halacha in Seder Zraim examined the botanical world from a strong scientific perspective. When the original christian and his apostles and their students attempted to cure people through primitive magic and exorcism, the Halacha employed a scientific knowledge of anatomy regarding questions of Trayfut and Nida and commanded us to seek medical advice in cases of mortal

danger. Judaism believes God provided man a mind disposed towards understanding science and technology in order that he be able to control certain sectors of nature. Therefore, Judaism is of the opinion that the human mission consists in the utilization of this wonderful ability of “וירדו בארץ וכבשוה”, dominate nature and configure it. Aggressiveness through scientific education is a part of our mission, with which the Creator of the universe has entrusted us.

Despite all this, Judaism is of the opinion that man is forbidden from placing absolute faith in scientific research, nor may he think that science is able to answer all problems and questions and redeem the world from all its problems and suffering. Man is forbidden to fall into the trap of intellectual haughtiness and is prohibited from bowing to the idolatry of primacy of his mind and thoughts. We must fully believe, that despite all the achievements and accomplishments of the human intellect, we will never be able to reveal the end of creation, nor will we ever find true satisfaction in living a life without God’s assistance. Only God can reveal to us the secret of our existence, only through Him can we realize our purpose and only He can help us build a complete ethical-moral world order, where each individual can feel fulfilled and content.

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