

## *Tazri'a*

### *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Marriage, Mitzvot and a Jew's Relationship to God*

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The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the Children of Israel saying, "When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male..." (Leviticus 12:1-2).

Prior to Revelation, a man would meet a woman in the market-place. If they would both want him to marry her, he would bring her into his home, have intercourse with her privately, and she would be unto him as a wife. Once the Torah was given, the Jews were commanded that if a man wants to marry a woman, he must first acquire her in the presence of witnesses and then she can be unto him as a wife (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Ishut* 1:1).



A familiar theme in the teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (the Rav) is defining the nature of the religious act, or what he calls the "religious gesture." The Rav points out that this act has two components, each necessary and indispensable. One is the act or physical performance of the *mitzvah* or commandment (in Hebrew, the *ma'aseh ha-mitzvah*), like holding the four species or sitting in a *sukkah* on the holiday of Tabernacles, eating *matzah* on Passover, or the daily recitation of the words that make up the Shema prayer. The second is the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*, the religious or spiritual goal that is attained by the act or the performance (in Hebrew, the *kiyyum ha-mitzvah*).

In most cases, these two components of the *mitzvah* are identical. The *ma'aseh ha-mitzvah* of eating *matzah*, for example, is to eat the *matzah* (the requisite amount in the requisite amount of time with, perhaps, the requisite posture). That represents the *kiyyum ha-mitzvah* as

well, achieved via the act itself. One achieves the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* by doing the act of the *mitzvah*. The same applies to taking the four species or counting the *omer* or to most religious commandments. The act also represents the fulfillment; its fulfillment is achieved by performing the act.

There are, however, selected *mitzvot* where the act and the fulfillment are separate from one another, the classic example being prayer. Here the act (*ma'aseh*) is the recital of words found in fixed texts; it is external, public and demonstrable. The fulfillment (*kiyyum*), by contrast, is "in the heart." Prayer is, after all, "service of the heart" (*Ta'anit* 2a); it is internal, private and personal. If one merely recites words, one has not fulfilled the *mitzvah*. This is also the case with regard to the recital of the Shema where the *ma'aseh* or act consists in the verbal declaration of a fixed text, like prayer, while the *kiyyum* or fulfillment is "accepting upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven," a deeply inner personal experience. Similar, as well, are the *mitzvot* of blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah and repentance where the act and the fulfillment are separate from one another.

The classic examples of this phenomenon, most often cited in the secondary literature on the subject, are the *mitzvot* of personal mourning and rejoicing on a festival. The Talmud assumes that they are mutually exclusive, a fact reflected in the ruling (*Mo'ed Katan* 14b) that the advent of a festival with its attendant obligation to rejoice cancels personal mourning. But the rationale for this ruling is not self-evident. After all, asked the Rav, the acts or behaviors mandated by both these obligations are not mutually exclusive: a mourner can eat the meat and drink the wine required for one who rejoices on a festival while one who is engaged in this rejoicing may refrain from bathing, greeting people and the like, activities mandated for the personal mourner. The physical acts required by both of these commandments do not stand in opposition to one another. Clearly, concluded Rabbi Soloveitchik,

the mutual contradiction between mourning and rejoicing does not involve the behavioral details of mourning and rejoicing. These outward acts do not contradict one another and could easily be accommodated together. The contradiction involves the *kiyyum* of the commandments of rejoicing and mourning in their

very essence and in the way they take effect. The essence of rejoicing is an inner act, the heart's joy; likewise, the nature of mourning is the inner attitude, the heart's grief. . . . These acts, however, are only the means through which man achieves the *kiyyum* of the commandments of inner rejoicing or mourning (*And From There You Shall Seek* [Jersey City, 2008], pp. 195–96, n. 19).

And since a person cannot simultaneously *feel* or *experience* joy and grief, these two *mitzvot* cannot possibly coexist simultaneously. It is thus quite obvious that the performance of these *mitzvot* is not fully discharged via action; an inner personal experiential dimension is required—and, indeed, is indispensable—as well.

This point is well taken. Merely doing the act is not enough. *Mitzvah* observance, on occasion, involves an inner experience in addition to an external performance. Both outward behavior and internal religious experience are necessary for the proper fulfillment of certain *mitzvot*. (For more on this idea in the teachings of Rabbi Soloveitchik, see David Shapiro, *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer, and Shavu'ot* [Jerusalem and New York, 2005], pp. 53–67, and the primary sources and secondary literature cited there.)

But the issue goes deeper than this. Close to fifty years ago, the Rav's younger son-in-law, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, underscored his father-in-law's emphasis on the indispensability of religious experience in the context of *mitzvah* observance in general, not limited only to those few examples mentioned above. For the Rav, wrote Rabbi Lichtenstein, *every mitzvah* observance must include an element of the internal and experiential in addition to the external and behavioral, even in those cases like *matzah*, the four species and *omer* where the act and the fulfillment are coterminous. *Every mitzvah* must combine act and emotion, behavior and feeling. ("R. Joseph Soloveitchik," in Simon Noveck, ed., *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century* [Clinton, 1963], pp. 295–96.)

In fact, this notion was central to the world view and academic scholarship of my late teacher and the Rav's older son-in-law, Dr. Isadore Twersky. In an article published in 1974, Dr. Twersky character-

ized Halakhah or “Jewish religious consciousness” as consisting of both “religion in manifestation” and “religion in essence,” borrowing from the title of a book by the well-known Dutch Gentile scholar, Gerardus van der Leeuw first published in 1963. Dr. Twersky understood “religion in manifestation” to be the outward act of the *mitzvah* performance. One *manifests* one’s commitment to God and Torah by *acting* in a certain way. The act is public, visible, obvious and identifiable. Holding the four species, eating *matzah*, sitting in a *sukkah*, reciting the *Kiddush* on Friday night, building a railing on one’s roof (*ma’akeh*) and lighting Shabbat candles are all examples of this category; anyone who looks at the one performing the act knows exactly what she or he is doing.

By contrast, “religion in essence” was understood as the inner, personal, subjective, hidden component of *mitzvah* observance, a focus on what Dr. Twersky called “interior, fluid spiritual forces and motives . . . internal sensibility and spirituality.” This element focuses on what the adherent of Halakhah is *feeling* or *experiencing* while performing the *mitzvah* act. After all, the fundamental assumption is that God does not want the halakhic practitioner to be merely a robot or a monkey; God wants the practitioner to be affected, inspired, elevated and even, hopefully, transformed by the *mitzvah* act she or he performs.

And, continued Dr. Twersky, both of these elements are absolutely necessary. “The true essence of halakah and its ultimate consummation,” he wrote, consists of both “prophecy and law, charisma and institution, mood and medium, image and reality, normative action and individual perception, objective determinacy and subjective ecstasy.” (“Religion and Law,” in S. D. Goitein, ed., *Religion in a Religious Age* [Cambridge, 1974], pp. 69–70, and p. 78, n. 2.)

In an earlier article, he formulated this point in the following way: “Halachah itself is a tense, vibrant, dialectical system which regularly insists upon normativeness in action and inwardness in feeling and thought. . . Halachah itself, therefore, in its own behalf, demands the coordination of inner meaning and external observance.” (“The Shulhan ‘Aruk: Enduring Code of Jewish Law,” *Judaism* 16:2 [1967], p. 157.)

And, indeed, this dual nature of the halakhic obligation in general was stressed repeatedly by Rabbi Soloveitchik; in fact, I would characterize it as one of the central components of his life’s teachings. The

following represents a small sample of passages in the Rav's writings where this theme is highlighted.

- I learned from her [my mother] very much. Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. . . The laws of Shabbat, for instance, were passed on to me by my father. . . The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother. . . The fathers *knew* much about the Shabbat; the mothers *lived* the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor. ("A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2 [1978], p. 77.)
- [There is] a serious educational-philosophical problem which has long troubled me. Orthodox youth have discovered the Torah through scholastic forms of thought, intellectual contact and cold logic. However, they have not merited to discover her [the Torah] through a live "experiential" feeling which excites and invigorates the heart. They know the Torah as an idea, but do not directly encounter her as an unmediated "reality," perceptible to "taste, sight and touch." Because many of them lack this "Torah-perception," their world view of Judaism becomes distorted. . . . In one word, they are confounded on the pathways of Judaism, and this perplexity is the result of unsophisticated perspectives and experiences. Halakhah is two-sided . . . the first is intellectual, but ultimately it is experiential. ("*Al Ahavat ha-Torah ve-Geulat Nefesh ha-Dor*," reprinted in Pinhas Peli, ed., *Be-Sod ha-Yahid ve-ha-Yahad* [Jerusalem, 1976], 407-08.)
- It is up to the Yeshiva and the teacher to open up the emotional world of Judaism to the students. . . . I can teach my students the laws and the philosophy of these Holy Days. I am not a bad teacher. However, I cannot transmit my recollections to them. If I want to transmit my experiences, I have to transmit myself, my own heart. . . . It is exactly what is lacking on the American scene. . . . There is no true *avo-*

*dah she-be-lev*, worship of the heart when it is only a mechanical recitation. The American Jew does not experience Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as the Jew of old did. He observes these days, but he does not truly experience their sanctity, and particularly the nearness to God.

This is exactly our greatest need in the United States—to feel and experience God's presence. It is not enough to eat *matzah*; we must feel the experience of the *mitzvah*. One should not only study Torah, but should actually experience it as a great drama and redeeming act which purges the personality. (Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, vol. 2 [1999], pp. 169–70.)

- The modern Jew is in dire need of religious experience, of a great ecstasy in living as a Jew and “being involved” in Jewishness. No matter how committed the contemporary Jew is, he is completely unaware of the emotional dimension of the religious act. The lack of warmth and joy in observing the law and practicing Judaism is appalling. He is mostly either over-intellectualized and too sophisticated or superficial and utilitarian in his relationship to the Almighty. (Nathaniel Helfgot, ed., *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* [Jersey City, 2005], 337–38.)

These four texts reflect the Rav's repeated insistence that “Judaism” or “Jewishness” involves not just act and behavior but emotion and feeling. The first one describes the profound influence his mother had on his life in sensitizing him to the flavor, scent and warmth of *mitzvot*, complimenting the more technical, legal, intellectual perspective that he learned from his father. In the second, he bemoaned the fact that while young American students of the type that found their way to his classroom at Yeshiva University were able to master the knowledge and logic of classical Jewish texts, they did not succeed in experiencing the “taste, sight, and touch” of Torah. They know Torah but they do not feel the excitement of Torah and, in his judgment, this will lead to potentially negative consequences. In a most remarkable self-reflective

passage, the third text, the Rav took personal responsibility for this state of affairs. In a somewhat self-deprecating formulation which no one took seriously, he took credit for being a good transmitter of the *knowledge of Torah* but faulted himself in failing to convey to his students the *experience of the presence of God*. He felt that he succeeded in conveying to them the technicalities of the laws relating to eating *matzah* on Passover but failed in conveying to them the experience of eating the *matzah* on Passover. And here, like in the last text cited, the frustration of the Rav's is extended to "the American Jew" or "the modern Jew" in general. Commitment and even observance is one thing; feelings, emotions, and "ecstasy" is something else entirely. The former without the latter is insufficient in expressing the fullness of religious engagement. In these passages—and there are others as well—the Rav noted that the "religious gesture" requires not only "formal compliance" but "a flavor, a scent and warmth;" requires not only thought, intellect and logic but "taste, sight and touch." Halakhah, for the Rav, was an experience, and he repeatedly insisted that it include not only external gestures but inner "warmth and joy."

Finally, in a remarkable passage, the Rav associated the indispensable coexistence of act ("religion in manifestation") and emotion ("religion in essence") in the service of God with a similar combination central to the marriage relationship between husband and wife, a relationship outlined in the passage from Maimonides cited at the beginning of this essay and one that, therefore, provides the necessary precondition to the conception of a child described at the beginning of *Parshat Tazri'a*. Rabbi Soloveitchik noted that marriage is "an objective institution and a subjective experience;" the connection between husband and wife entails actions as well as feelings. Similarly, "There are two aspects to the religious gesture in Judaism: strict objective discipline and exalted subjective romance. Both are indispensable." He noted that, "Feelings not manifesting themselves in deeds are volatile and transient; deeds not linked with inner experience are soulless and ritualistic. Both the subjective as well as the objective component are indispensable for the self-realization of the religious personality. . . Judaism is first a discipline and second a romance." ("Marriage," *Family Redeemed* [2000], pp. 39–41.)

The emotional connection suggested in the word “romance” expresses an experience relevant not only to that which exists—or should exist—between wife and husband; it represents also the kind of experience a Jew should strive to have with God. Our connection to our Father in Heaven is predicated on our worship of him through action, of course, but it is also necessary to see it as a relationship—personal, private and intimate—indeed, even romantic.



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