Subject Formation and Contemporary Life: Prayer in Postwar American Jewish Thought

Joshua Stolper Siary

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SUBJECT FORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY LIFE

Prayer in Postwar American Jewish Thought

by

JOSHUA STOLPER SIARY


A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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SUBJECT FORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY LIFE
Prayer in Postwar American Jewish Thought
written by Joshua Stolper Siary
has been approved for the Department of Religious Studies

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above-mentioned discipline.
ABSTRACT

Siary, Joshua Stolper (M.A., Department of Religious Studies)

Subject Formation and Contemporary Life: Prayer in Postwar American Jewish Thought

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Elias Sacks

In recent decades, the study of ritual has become a rapidly growing field within the academic study of religion, with prayer constituting one particularly productive area of focus. Moreover, prayer figures prominently not only in the academic study of religion as a whole, but also in the study of American Judaism. Nevertheless, few academic works take the way prayer is treated in American Jewish thought—what I will refer to as “American Jewish theories of prayer”—as a central object of analysis. My thesis will address this gap in current scholarship by examining the treatment of prayer in the work of two rabbis influential in postwar American Jewish life: Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Elie Kaunfer. I argue that for both Kaunfer and Soloveitchik, prayer is implicated in, and in fact crucial to, processes of subject formation seen to be necessary given perceived problems with contemporary life. More specifically, I argue that both Soloveitchik and Kaunfer understand prayer as a way to help form the worshiper into what we can call an ideal subject—that is, a particular type of individual in possession of certain skills, habits, and commitments—who is seen to be necessary given the specific problems each identifies with contemporary life. Taking seriously the way these thinkers understand prayer can raise important questions for the study of American Judaism in addition to ongoing conversations in the academic study of religion more generally.
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the study of ritual has moved beyond an early focus on function and structure that explored topics such as the symbolic content of ritual acts and the role of ritual in maintaining social order towards examining the performative aspects of ritual as a cultural product and disciplinary tool for shaping certain kinds of religious subjects. One particularly widespread type of religious performance is prayer. Like the study of other types of ritual action, explorations of prayer can address questions about the way religious practices enact social transformation, the function of such practices in maintaining the social order, and the way these types of acts perform culture and identity. Indeed, the examination of prayer not only allows us to address these questions about structure, function, and performance that are important to the study of ritual, but also offers an opportunity to address a host of issues that are often taken to be important to the study of religion more generally, such as conceptions of supernatural agents, beliefs regarding the workings of the cosmos, understandings of human and superhuman agency, and questions relating to the history and culture of specific communities. In other words, studying prayer allows one to engage many of the key elements typically placed under the umbrella term ‘religion.’

Prayer figures prominently not only in the academic study of religion as a whole, but also in the study of American Judaism. Indeed, as various scholars have noted, performative, textual, and theological innovations in worship have played a key role in many of the transformations that have taken place in American Jewish life. For example, early twentieth-century debates over whether men and women could sit together in synagogues during prayer services helped
crystallize divisions between denominations that shared many of the same theological commitments.\(^1\) Similarly, as Jews in the decades after the Second World War began to replace their immigrant identities with more self-consciously American ones, many of these individuals not only moved from the inner cities to more affluent suburbs but also reimagined worship practices: for example, suburban synagogues introduced a variety of changes—such as moving the leader of the prayer service from the center of the synagogue to the front—intended to emphasize the purportedly ‘American’ qualities of conformity, decorum, and quiet observation in rejection of the cacophonous, participatory aesthetics of urban immigrant congregations.\(^2\) A generation later, as younger Jews embraced the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, the new movements they created (such as the Havurah movement and Renewal Judaism) rejected the decorum of their parents’ suburban congregations in favor of more ecstatic and participatory forms of prayer that reflected the attitudes and ideals of the counterculture more broadly.\(^3\) To offer one final example, as Orthodox Jews in postwar United States struggled to restore a sense of continuity with the way of life practiced in Europe before the massive ruptures caused by the Holocaust, many communities replaced an earlier preference for idiosyncratic, family- and region-specific modes of practice—prayer included—with a newfound emphasis on strict adherence to the details of ritual performance defined in religious texts that were seen as preserving an authentic and unbroken chain of tradition.\(^4\)

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3. For a history of the Havurah movement, see ibid., 69-111.
Nevertheless, despite the importance of prayer in American Jewish life, few academic works take the way prayer is treated in American Jewish thought—what I will refer to as “American Jewish theories of prayer”—as a central object of analysis. Studies of the history and anthropology of American Jews that discuss prayer tend not to focus on specific theories of prayer but rather on sociological or ethnographic topics, and most works that do look at theories of prayer tend to pay little attention to the contemporary period or are written from a distinctly theological perspective.

What is needed, therefore, is a work that takes seriously American Jewish theories of prayer. Such a study could provide valuable data for comparison with academic theories of prayer and ritual, enriching a field that has neglected contemporary Judaism. My thesis will address this critical gap in current scholarship by explicating two theories of prayer in American Judaism developed in the period after World War Two, analyzing them on their own terms and comparing them with each other in order to both tell a richer story about twentieth and twenty-first century American Judaism, and contribute to broader conversations in the academic study of religion.

I will pursue these goals by examining the works of two leading American rabbis who have been active in the postwar period and have engaged seriously with prayer and worship: Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), the most influential figure in twentieth-century Modern Orthodox Judaism, and Elie Kaunfer (1973—), one of the founding figures of what has come to be known as the Independent Minyan (prayer group) movement.\footnote{For background on these movements, see my discussion in the Approach section.} Since Soloveitchik was one of the earliest rabbis writing about prayer after the Second World War, and since Kaunfer is still active and writing today, they can serve as bookends for postwar American Jewish thinking on
prayer. I will attempt to grasp how each thinker understands prayer through careful attention to and interpretation of both written sources and audio recordings while asking questions about their treatment of the performance, structure, and function of prayer. My aim is to explicate their models of prayer, to identify what is at stake for each thinker when they discuss and theorize prayer, and to see what this teaches us about the way prayer is understood by American Jewish thinkers.

Based on my research, I will contend that, in two significant strands of postwar American Jewish thought, prayer is implicated in, and in fact crucial to, processes of subject formation seen to be necessary given perceived problems with contemporary life. Specifically, I argue that both Soloveitchik and Kaunfer understand prayer as a way to help form the participant into what we can call an ideal subject—that is, a particular type of individual in possession of certain skills, habits, and commitments—who is seen to be necessary given the specific problems each identifies with contemporary life. Put differently, for both Soloveitchik and Kaunfer, there are specific issues with contemporary life that make it particularly valuable to form practitioners into certain types of individuals. Although each thinker imagines these problems and the ideal subjects they call for in different ways, both see prayer as central to the process of subject formation that produces these individuals.

**LITERATURE REVIEW: PRAYER AND AMERICAN JUDAISM**

Despite prayer’s centrality to Jewish practice, it has often received less attention than topics such as the social and political history of Jewish communities or the historical-critical analysis of classical Jewish literature. To quote one leading scholar, “in comparison with similar areas of study, the number of articles and books on [Jewish prayer] as a whole is few, courses are
rare, progress in research is slow and spasmodic, and the interest of learned societies and academic conferences is distinctly limited.” Most academic studies that *do* engage with prayer either focus primarily on the historical development of the liturgy (the fixed order of prayers traditionally associated with Jewish worship) and its structure, or examine its role in a specific community as part of an ethnographic or sociological study, rather than exploring the way particular thinkers have constructed prayer. Works that do examine *specific* theories of prayer either tend to be so broad as to devote relatively little attention to contemporary American theories, or appraise these theories from a distinctly theological perspective.

Liturgical histories such as Ismar Elbogen’s *Jewish Liturgy* (1913), Tzvee Zahavy’s *Studies in Jewish Prayer* (1990), and Lawrence Hoffman’s *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (1979) tend to focus on the text of the liturgy—either on specific prayers or on liturgical collections such as the *Siddur* (the weekday, Sabbath, and holiday prayerbook) or the *Machzor* (a prayerbook for the High Holy Days)—tracing the history of the development, canonization, publication, and reform of these texts.7 Stefan C. Reif’s *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (1993) does a good job of balancing a focus on the prayerbooks with discussions of “changing trends in Jewish attitudes to worship.”8 Though these studies are valuable for the work they do in establishing the textual history of the liturgy, the wide historical scope with which they operate.

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means they engage with more contemporary forms of Jewish worship in a relatively cursory fashion.

Ethnographic and sociological studies have done the most significant work addressing the role of prayer in contemporary American Jewish life. Works such as Samuel C. Heilman’s *Synagogue Life* (1976), his *Cosmopolitans & Parochials* (1989) with Steven M. Cohen, and Riv-Ellen Prell’s *Prayer and Community* (1989), provide valuable insight into the place of prayer and synagogue ritual in shaping social relationships, forming identity, and defining communal and denominational boundaries. While such studies are extremely valuable for the work they do in examining prayer’s role in larger communal dynamics, they devote relatively little attention to specific theories of prayer.

There are many theologically focused works that outline theories of prayer. Works such as Jakob J. Petuchowski’s *Understanding Jewish Prayer* (1972), Jack J. Cohen’s *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the Twentieth Century* (2000), and Gabriel H. Cohn and Harold Fisch’s *Prayer in Judaism* (1996) collect first-person theories of prayer or mix them with articles about these or older theories for the purpose of addressing contemporary issues related to religious observance. The problem with such works is that while they outline and devote some attention to American Jewish theories of prayer, it is usually in order to synthesize them into a theological argument or evaluate them based on previously held theological commitments. In other words, these works end up producing further theological elaborations rather than studying

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existing theories at a scholarly distance. They adopt an explicitly religious stance, rather than one that attempts to suspend theological valuation.

Two notable exceptions stand out from this genre: Shalom Rosenberg’s valuable essay “Prayer and Jewish Thought: Approaches and Problems (A Survey)” (1996), and Seth Kadish’s magisterial book *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* (1997).\(^{11}\) In “Prayer and Jewish Thought,” Rosenberg carefully delineates diverse theories of prayer in Jewish literature from late antiquity to the contemporary period and distinguishes the different philosophical “paradoxes” each theory tries to address. For example, Rosenberg claims that many “existentialist” theories of prayer are responding to what he calls the “Anthropological Paradox.” On this view, while some developments in modern thought and culture cast human beings as utterly insignificant in the universe and therefore leave us feeling as if we are unworthy of praying to God, other developments portray human beings as self-reliant “Promethean” figures for whom praying to an all-powerful God would be debasing.\(^{12}\) The chief limitation of Rosenberg’s essay, however, is that its format as an essay prevents him from providing in-depth analyses of the theories he discusses. However, this deficiency is made up for in Kadish’s book, for which Rosenberg’s essay might be said to serve as a prolegomenon. In *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer*, Kadish picks up where Rosenberg leaves off by providing detailed examinations of diverse theories with Rosenberg’s typologies and paradoxes serving as his framework. Although, unlike Rosenberg, Kadish does have a theological agenda, his careful and critical attention to accurately explicating each theory balances out the religious critiques he occasionally provides.


\(^{12}\) Rosenberg, “Prayer and Jewish Thought,” 96. My understanding of this paradox is influenced by Kadish.
The main fault with Kadish is that—as we will see in my discussion of his scholarship on Soloveitchik—he omits some important sources from his discussion of these thinkers.

Although Rosenberg and Kadish have made some important strides forward, American Jewish theories of prayer are very much still an under-researched topic. My work will therefore pursue such research into these theories of prayer, not in order to synthesize or to clarify my own beliefs, but rather to discover what sorts of concerns are important to such theories and how they might raise broader questions for future study.

**APPROACH: SOLOVEITCHIK AND KAUNFER**

The theories of prayer I will explore in the following chapters come from the works of two leading American rabbis who have been active in the postwar period and have engaged seriously with prayer and worship: Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Elie Kaunfer. In order to illuminate the background of these theories, I will introduce each thinker, along with the current state of scholarship on their work. I will end this section with a brief explanation of why I chose these figures in particular.

**JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK**

Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was the leading Modern Orthodox authority on Jewish law in the middle of the twentieth-century. Born in Poland, Soloveitchik was trained until his teenage years in a method of studying Jewish texts developed by his grandfather, who was also an influential rabbi. In addition to this training, Soloveitchik also acquired a secular education, graduating in 1931 with a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Berlin, where

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13. Modern Orthodox Jews attempt to balance a commitment to participating in modern society while living a lifestyle fully defined by traditional Jewish law. See below.
he studied logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and the neo-Kantian Jewish philosopher Herman Cohen.\(^{14}\)

Soloveitchik emigrated to the United States in 1932 and quickly came to be known for his brilliance, becoming the head of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshivah University, a major institution of Modern Orthodoxy, in 1941.\(^ {15}\) Over the course of forty years there, he personally trained and ordained close to 2,000 rabbis, more than any other single individual whom we know of in Jewish history.\(^ {16}\) Indeed, the impact of his thought on generations of his students has left a mark that can still be felt today. Over the course of his long life, Soloveitchik was of major symbolic importance to Modern Orthodox Jews, for whom his comfort in and commitment to both modern and traditional Jewish worlds served as a source of legitimacy, providing a model for their own attempts to live fully traditional lives while still engaging in the modern world.\(^ {17}\) Since his passing in 1993, no one has been able to provide the same level of legitimation to these endeavors, and according to some scholars, Modern Orthodox Jews have increasingly begun to follow much more traditionalist Orthodox leaders with more suspicious views of engaging with modern society.\(^ {18}\) Although Soloveitchik was born in Europe, I take him to be an American thinker because it was after coming to America that he exerted the

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18. For a book-length exploration of this traditionalist shift in Modern Orthodox Judaism, see ibid.
most influence and produced most of his works, and because his American context informed many of the issues he dealt with in his writings.

The sources I use for examining Soloveitchik’s thought come from four different periods in his life. In particular, I focus on his 1944 essay *Halakhic Man*, in which he provides an early critique of modernity and presents an early vision of an ideal subject; on a series of notebooks (from the mid-to-late 1950s) that outline a basic theory of prayer and its performance; on his influential essays “Confrontation” and “The Lonely Man of Faith” (produced in 1964 and 1965, respectively), which together represent significant developments of his nascent theory of prayer and his discussion of modernity in the earlier notebooks; and lastly, five articles written in the 1960s and 1970s that together constitute his last significant writings on prayer and modernity, tying together and developing many of the earlier themes. Four of these articles were published together in the Orthodox journal *Tradition* in 1978: “The Community,” “Majesty and Humility,” “Catharsis,” and “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah.” The fifth article, “Reflections on the Amidah,” was first published by the Hebrew-language journal *Hadarom* in 1979 but was translated after his death and appeared in the 2003 collection *Worship of the Heart* (along with

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Siary, Joshua—Introduction

the notebooks from the 1950s). “Reflections on the Amidah” represents the last major essay Soloveitchik published on prayer in his lifetime.

Although a significant amount of the scholarship on Soloveitchik comes from theologians writing in the same religious tradition as he did (including many of his own students), there are a number of important works that examine his thought from a more academic perspective. Works such as David Singer’s and Moshe Sokol’s “Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith” (1982) and William Kolbrener’s The Last Rabbi: Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition (2016) examine the complex relationships between his life and work. Studies such as Dov Schwartz’s Religion or Halakha: The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (2007) and David Hartman’s “The Halakhic Hero: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man” (1989) analyze the ideas within one particular text (in these cases, Soloveitchik’s best-known work, Halakhic Man). While these scholars provide valuable analyses of his thought, very little of the scholarship I have found addresses his theory of prayer at length.

In the article by Singer and Sokol, prayer comes up only as an emotional form of practice that serves as a counterpoint to the overly intellectual study of Jewish texts. This approach implicitly treats prayer as incidental to Soloveitchik’s thought and ignores the deep concern with prayer that he displays in his later writings. Additionally, Singer and Sokol fail to account for the

fact that in “Redemption, Prayer, and Talmud Torah,” Soloveitchik emphasizes the intellectual aspects of prayer as well, elevating it almost above the study of classical Jewish texts in its ability to redeem the individual through its unification of the intellect with the emotions.25

Aside from this article and a few mentions in the Shalom Rosenberg essay I cited earlier, I have found only two other texts that devote significant academic attention to Soloveitchik’s theory of prayer: a section from Seth Kadish’s aforementioned book *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* (1997), and David Hartman’s article “Prayer and Religious Consciousness: An Analysis of Jewish Prayer in the Works of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Abraham Joshua Heschel” (2003).26 Kadish argues that Soloveitchik’s theory of prayer is largely a philosophical response to what Rosenberg calls the “Anthropological Paradox,” whereby modern views of humanity’s stature and abilities see prayerful supplication as being unworthy of an independent and self-reliant individual, while simultaneously seeing humanity’s utter insignificance in the cosmos as making us unworthy of approaching God in prayer. Kadish claims that, on the one hand, Soloveitchik’s emphasis on the grounding of prayer in Jewish law, and more specifically on the idea that prayer becomes problematic outside of the rules and laws which are traditionally taken to obligate Jews to pray in a specific manner, instantiates one side of this Anthropological Paradox, reflecting the view that man is unworthy of engaging in prayer. On the other hand, Kadish argues, Soloveitchik’s

25. In the next chapter I will address the role of both the emotions and the intellect in Soloveitchik’s theory of prayer. For a source in Soloveitchik, see Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” 66-67.
emphasis on the ways in which prayer elevates the endeavors of humanity by teaching us our true needs reflects the view of the human being as an independent and creative entity.  

One of the great strengths of Kadish’s work is the way in which he contextualizes Soloveitchik’s theory against the backdrop of other modern approaches to philosophical paradoxes surrounding prayer. Furthermore, he expertly weaves in a discussion of prayer in the work of a number of Soloveitchik’s close disciples, illuminating points that are not always obvious in Soloveitchik’s writings through highlighting the strengths and criticizing the weaknesses in the way these later figures portray their own teacher’s work.

In fact, one of Soloveitchik’s students critiqued by Kadish is David Hartman, the author of the second work that deals with Soloveitchik’s theory of prayer at length. In this later article “Prayer and Religious Consciousness: An Analysis of Jewish Prayer in the Works of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Abraham Joshua Heschel,” Hartman compares Soloveitchik’s theory with the work of two other major Jewish thinkers in the twentieth century, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Hartman argues that Soloveitchik’s emphasis on the human being’s utter inability to approach God outside of the fixed liturgy is taken not from Jewish sources, but from non-Jewish works such as Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*, a text cited regularly by Soloveitchik. Although Hartman’s comparison between these figures is enlightening, the manner in which Soloveitchik is invoked suggests that Hartman’s analysis is motivated by a religious critique of Soloveitchik for not grounding his theory of prayer in allegedly purely Jewish texts. Furthermore, Hartman’s portrayal of Soloveitchik as a thinker who emphasizes a total denial of human self-worth ignores one of the key points that I

27. Kadish, *Kavvana*, 194-226. I will discuss this aspect of Soloveitchik’s thought in my chapter on his work.
28. Ibid.
will reveal in my analysis: the point that, for Soloveitchik, prayer is linked to an affirmation of human worthiness that empowers the human being to engage in creative endeavors.

That is not to say that Kadish’s discussion of Soloveitchik is without its flaws. Neither Kadish nor any other scholar whose work I have read explores the writings on prayer that were published, for the first time, in the 2003 volume *Worship of the Heart*.29 These texts reveal crucial elements of Soloveitchik’s thinking that are central to his other writings on prayer and will play a key role in my own reading of Soloveitchik’s work. Furthermore, none of these studies devotes sufficient attention to the importance of drawing on Soloveitchik’s writings on topics other than prayer to illuminate his discussions of worship. For example, even though a few scholars occasionally make reference to his article “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” none of these readers look at his other articles published alongside it in that same issue of *Tradition*. By contrast, in attempting to understand the argument Soloveitchik presents in “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” I have treated these articles as a single work. Although none of the other articles deals with prayer (with the exception of “The Community,” which has gone largely unnoticed among scholars), and although they were composed at separate points throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s, Soloveitchik chose to publish them together at the same time. Seeing these as separate sections of a single work reveals a consistent train of thought, with each article building on the themes of those preceding it, leading up to and illuminating the theory of prayer he presents in “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah.”30 Thus, my thesis will be the first

29. Shalom Carmy, the editor and compiler of the volume, does discuss this material in the introduction, but he does not present his own analysis. Rather, he summarizes the contents of the work and provides background on Soloveitchik to orient the reader.
30. Though his eulogy to the Rebbitzen of Talne is the actual conclusion to this sequence of articles, placed after “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” the specificity of the subject matter makes it of less significance for his theory of prayer. However, it is a fertile source for looking at his views on women and gender.
study of prayer in Soloveitchik that makes use of these sources—and, in so doing, will provide a more comprehensive, nuanced account of his approach to this topic.

**Elie Kaunfer**

Elie Kaunfer (1973—) is the current head of Mechon Hadar, a prominent institution of egalitarian Jewish learning and prayer in New York. He was instrumental in the recent formation and spread of what are known as independent minyanim—prayer groups that are separate from established synagogues, that place a particular emphasis on reaching adults in their twenties and thirties, and that seek to reinvigorate Jewish practice through aesthetically powerful, spiritually meaningful, and fully egalitarian performances of the traditional Jewish liturgy. The son of a rabbi and a Jewish educator, Kaunfer benefited from the many Jewish educational initiatives in twentieth-century America, attending Jewish day school, becoming involved in Jewish life at Harvard (where he received his undergraduate degree), and living in Israel with the support of a Jewish leadership fellowship. While in Israel, he witnessed traditional services where people were so engaged in the act of praying that, for the first time, he became open to the possibility that prayer can be a deeply meaningful experience. Yet he was deeply uncomfortable with the fact that most of these communities did not allow men and women to pray together. When he moved to New York City after college for work, he was similarly frustrated with his inability to find a community that was able to provide that meaningful experience without excluding women. He eventually dropped out of Jewish life and threw himself into a new job as an investment banker for Morgan Stanley for the next few years. After leaving this job in 2000, Kaunfer spent a

few months in Israel, where he found himself studying at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies, which reawakened his desire to be meaningfully engaged in Jewish life. When he returned to New York City to start a new job, he spent his “free time after work dreaming up a Jewish community that would legitimately forge a deep connection to God through traditional prayer, without giving up modern values.” He soon joined two friends who were similarly frustrated at being unable to find such a community, and in 2001 launched a new independent minyan named Kehilat Hadar (“Community of Splendor”) that would embody their vision of a community that would engage in vibrant, meaningful performances of the full traditional liturgy, but in a manner that would reflect a commitment to gender egalitarianism. This independent minyan “became a model of grassroots religious community that spread dramatically across the United States and Israel.” By the end of their first year, the success of this minyan had inspired the creation of five more, and by 2009, over sixty of these independent minyanim (plural of minyan) had emerged across the United States. The remarkable success of his vision led him, in 2002, to enroll at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was eventually ordained as a rabbi. In 2006, Kaunfer co-founded the non-profit organization Mechon Hadar with Rabbi Shai Held and Rabbi Ethan Tucker to support these minyanim as they spread across the country, forming networks and organizing meetings and conferences with their leaders. Mechon Hadar also serves as the first fully egalitarian yeshiva (institution of traditional Jewish learning) in America, dedicated to “empowering” lay Jews with the skills to be actively engaged in prayer and the

32. Ibid., 10.
33. Ibid., 11.
34. Ibid., 61.
35. Ibid., 12.
36. Ibid., 11.
37. Ibid., 62.
study of classical Jewish texts. Kaunfer currently serves as President and CEO of Mechon Hadar.

My primary source for understanding Kaunfer’s thought is his 2010 book Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities, from which I derive his vision of the ideal subject, his critique of contemporary Jewish life, and his views on prayer. I also refer to a number of podcasts and lectures he has made available on the Mechon Hadar website, specifically his lecture series Core Issues in Jewish Prayer: Meaning, Spirit and Music; his 2014 lecture Can American Jews Still Pray? The Future of Jewish Prayer; his 2015 podcast The Non-Cognitive Aspects of Prayer; and his 2015 lecture Focus in an Age of Distraction: Kavanah as Counter-Culture. I have also consulted a number of editorials he published in Jewish newspapers.

38. Ibid., 131.
Unlike Soloveitchik, there is currently no scholarship that engages Kaunfer as a Jewish thinker. There are, of course, studies of the Independent Minyan movement, such as Shirah Weinberg Hecht’s “The Dance with Tradition: Two Generations of the Independent Minyan in America” (2013); a 2007 study by Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Kaunfer himself, and Michelle Shain entitled “Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants”; and a number of master’s theses made available on the Mechon Hadar website. However, these studies have focused mainly on quantitative analyses of the Independent Minyan movement emerging from sociological disciplines, rather than on the theoretical account of prayer—or, indeed of other topics—operative in this movement. Aside from a brief history by Jonathan Sarna that serves as the forward to Kaunfer’s book, most other writings on independent minyanim are non-academic articles in newspapers, websites, and magazines. My thesis will therefore be among the first studies of Kaunfer and the Independent Minyan movement that approach them from the standpoint of the academic study of religion and treat Kaunfer as a thinker in his own right.

**WHY THESE THINKERS?**

The figures I have chosen to analyze are thinkers whose work demonstrates a deep concern about the way prayer is performed, experienced, and understood. Furthermore, both are

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leading figures in communities that claim to engage in traditional forms of worship while also embracing at least some aspects of contemporary American society and values. Both thinkers state that their theories are derived not out of pure theological speculation, but from their own personal experience. Soloveitchik claims explicitly at the beginning of *Worship of the Heart* that his entire argument is based purely on his own experiences: “I am not lecturing on philosophy of prayer as such, but on prayer as understood, experienced and enjoyed by an individual. I acquaint you with my own personal experience.” So too, even though Kaunfer’s work is a manifesto for his own vision of Jewish life, his suggestions about prayer are grounded in his own experiences building and participating in independent minyanim.

There are also a number of important differences between the two thinkers. 1) While Soloveitchik is among the first generation of Jewish thinkers writing after the Second World War, Kaunfer is a current thinker and represents a leading figure in one influential strand of Judaism today. 2) Soloveitchik was born and educated in Europe before the Holocaust, while Kaunfer was born and raised in the United States, and benefited from the many Jewish educational initiatives in twentieth-century America. 3) These figures come from significantly different sectors of the Jewish community. In fact, each to some degree embodies what the other sees as the challenge faced by contemporary Jews. For example, Soloveitchik takes a particularly strong stand against allowing men and women to sit together in synagogue, a point of major debate in the early twentieth century. He claims that “a synagogue with a mixed seating arrangement forfeits its sanctity … and is unfit for prayer.” By contrast, as I will discuss in

44. Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism*, 1, 14.
greater detail later, Kaunfer takes full gender inclusivity in all aspects of worship to be crucial. For Soloveitchik, Kaunfer’s acceptance of egalitarian practices such as mixed-gender seating during prayer and the role of women in leading worship would have represented an unforgivable intrusion of contemporary values into a timeless, legally defined activity; for Kaunfer, by contrast, Soloveitchik’s rejection of these types of initiatives represents precisely the sort of cultural and historical baggage that discourages Jews from participating in traditional prayer services.

Taken together, then, these thinkers can serve as useful bookends for postwar American Jewish thinking on prayer, providing access to treatments of these topics in different types of communal settings, both in the first decades following the Second World War and in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

**PRAYER AND SUBJECT FORMATION**

In this thesis I argue that both Soloveitchik and Kaunfer understand prayer as a way to help form the participant into what we can call an ideal subject—that is, a particular type of individual in possession of certain skills, habits, and commitments—who is seen to be necessary given the specific problems each identifies with contemporary life.

To flesh out the theoretical background of this argument, I will briefly examine the sources from which I derive these terms. I take my understanding of prayer from Sam D. Gill, who defines it as an activity that makes present that which is inaccessible, namely a “radical other” existing in a reality perceived as separate from everyday experience.\(^{46}\)

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My understanding of subject formation emerges from recent developments in the field of ritual studies. Considered a sub-discipline of the academic study of religion, ritual studies has produced a significant body of literature examining and theorizing diverse forms of religious practice. Some scholars, following early theorists such as Emile Durkheim and Arnold Van Gennep, focus on the social function of ritual and how its structure helps to create and maintain the social order. Other scholars, such as Clifford Geertz, focus on analyzing the symbolic language of ritual to examine the ways in which these practices both produce and are productions of culture, as well as the ways in which such practices communicate meaning. The more recent turn towards an interest in subject formation is represented by scholars such as Talal Asad and Catherine Bell. Their work examines how the specific enactment of rituals shape participants into particular types of subjects—that is, into individuals with certain types of skills, habits, and commitments.

Based on this literature, let me briefly clarify the way I that I will be using some of the key concepts that will figure prominently in subsequent chapters: subject formation; skills, habits, and commitments; and the ideal subject. When I refer to processes of subject formation, I am referring to the varied and complex processes that shape us into particular sorts of individuals with certain sorts of cognitive and non-cognitive capacities and perspectives. In particular, I will be concerned with processes that instill what I will describe as “skills,” “habits,” and “commitments”: abilities to perform certain tasks, dispositions to behave in certain ways, and

commitments to certain modes of life. To illuminate what I mean, I will use my own experience as a graduate student as an example. Attending graduate school for the past three years has given me the habit of reading texts in a specific manner and from a certain perspective; in fact, it has habituated me into a lifestyle marked by countless hours of reading and reflection. It has also given me the skills to engage in research, writing, and grading, while at the same generating in me strong commitments to certain schools of thought, academic endeavors, and ethical and professional norms; indeed, it has literally committed me to enacting specific duties, rules, and obligations as a university employee. In a word, by providing me with a specific set of skills, habits, and commitments, graduate school helped shape me into the sort of person I am today. It was, therefore, a process of subject formation. By “ideal subject,” finally, I am referring to an individual who has undergone a process of subject formation and acquired what is taken, by a particular thinker or tradition, to be an ideal or correct set of skills, habits, and commitments. In the previous example, the “ideal subject” would be the graduate student who has acquired the right sort of skills, habits, and commitments from her time in graduate school. Thus, when I claim that Soloveitchik and Kaunfer each understand prayer as shaping ideal subjects, I am saying that they understand prayer as contributing to a process of subject formation that is able to provide a participant with what they take to be the correct set of skills, habits, and commitments.

**THESIS OUTLINE**

In the first chapter, I will begin by arguing that the ideal subject Soloveitchik imagines is one who is committed to enacting God’s will in every aspect of his life, who is habituated to always remaining aware of the limits this will imposes on the sort of actions he is able to perform, and who is skilled at withdrawing from those activities that the divine will prohibits
while simultaneously pursuing those goals it commands him to seek in a way that demonstrates his awareness of ethical norms. Put in Soloveitchik’s own language, the ideal subject is one who can dialectically engage in “majestic gestures” as part of a community dedicated to pursuing infinite success in all human endeavors, while simultaneously being able to withdraw from the pursuit of success through “acts of sacrifice” that demonstrate awareness of the finite limitations placed upon his activities through adherence to the divine will. I will then show that, for Soloveitchik, due to the incredible technological, scientific, and cultural advancements of the modern era, the modern individual has forgotten that there are limits to what he can achieve, making it uniquely difficult for him to be able engage in the sacrificial motion and become an ideal subject. I will conclude this chapter by demonstrating that, for Soloveitchik, the regular performance of prayer is able to train the modern subject to engage in the sacrificial motion by making him aware of the finite limits of his abilities while simultaneously teaching him what needs are actually worth pursuing with his majestic gestures. Thus, prayer is able to restore to the individual the skills, habits, and commitments—undermined by modern life—that allow him to be both sacrificial and majestic, forming the worshiper into Soloveitchik’s ideal subject.

In the second chapter, I will begin by arguing that the ideal subject imagined by Kaunfer—what he calls the “Empowered Jew”—is habituated to being actively engaged in Jewish communal life and therefore comes to acquire a host of skills and commitments: for example, the skills necessary to participate in any role during worship services and a commitment to joining and forming communities that will further deepen these skills and habits while simultaneously instilling them in other individuals. I will then show how, for Kaunfer, poor worship aesthetics and a misguided editing of the liturgy have led to a “crisis of engagement” whereby Jews are discouraged from actively participating in, and have become
emotionally disconnected from, worship, resulting in large numbers of Jews dropping out of Jewish life in general. Put differently, Jews have become passive and emotionally disconnected due to poor aesthetic choices that discourage participation and undercut the affective power of the liturgy. The chapter will conclude by showing how, when these aesthetic errors are corrected so that Jews are encouraged to participate in worship, prayer is able to generate a meaningful connection to God through the emotions, motivating worshipers to deepen their participation in communities where they can become the type of “empowered” individuals who can reinvigorate Jewish life in America. In short, the experience of participating in a prayer service, properly performed, motivates a deeper involvement in Jewish communal life that allows the worshiper to gain the skills, habits, and commitments that constitute her as Kaunfer’s ideal subject.

I will conclude my thesis by briefly comparing these theories. More specifically, I begin by comparing Soloveitchik’s and Kaunfer’s visions of the ideal subject, turn to a comparison of their critiques of contemporary life, and finish with a discussion of the roles that prayer plays for them in creating this ideal subject. I will then end by suggesting some possible questions this thesis raises that could enrich ongoing conversations within the academic study of religion as a whole.

**KEY TERMS FOR JEWISH PRAYER AND AMERICAN JEWISH DENOMINATIONS**

Since the following chapters will examine some complex ideas and concepts, I have attempted to reduce my use of technical terminology. Nevertheless, the nature of this topic forces me to use a variety of terms and phrases associated with the Jewish tradition.
In addition to drawing on Gill’s account of prayer cited earlier in this introduction, I will generally use the term “prayer” interchangeably with the term “worship” to refer to the performance of the traditional Jewish liturgy. By “liturgy” I am referring to the fixed order of blessings, praises, psalms, poetry, and ritual actions traditionally associated with Jewish worship services. Any given day will have at least three prayer services: one in the morning, another in the afternoon, and one more in the evening (although on the Sabbath and some holidays, more services may be added). The content and arrangement of this liturgy varies depending on location of a given worship service in a set of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly cycles of observances. For example, unlike other days of the week, morning services on Mondays, Thursdays, the Sabbath, and holidays—along with afternoon services on the Sabbath and some other occasions—include a public reading from a Sefer Torah, a large, hand-written scroll that contains the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch or Torah). This reading is accompanied by a number of extra blessings and rituals not normally recited during the week. Similarly, some prayers involve the recitation of certain words on the Sabbath, and other words on other days of the week. The various liturgical arrangements for each service are typically recorded in a prayerbook. Additionally, the liturgy is traditionally recited in Hebrew (and, to a lesser extent, Aramaic) to different melodies that vary from community to community. I will be using the phrases “prayer service,” “worship service,” and “synagogue service” interchangeably throughout the following chapters to refer to performances of this liturgy.

51. Ibid., 15-90.
52. Elbogen provides a thorough examination of these cycles throughout his book.
54. Ibid., 158-163
The two “most ancient and important of the prayers,” in the Jewish liturgy, and the ones with which I will be most concerned in the following chapters, are the *Shema* (a word which means “Hear” or “Listen,” taken from the first word of its central line) and the *Amidah* (a word which means “Standing,” referring to the fact that this prayer is traditionally recited while standing). According to Elbogen, “the *Shema* contains the confession of faith, the core of Israel’s belief, while the *Amidah* consists of a number of petitions touching the chief needs of the individual and community.”

The morning, afternoon, and evening worship services on any given day are each organized around a performance of the *Amidah*. Instituted as a basic obligation for Jewish men in late antiquity, this prayer’s centrality and its focus on petitions also earned it the name *ha-Tefillah* (“The Prayer”). It is composed of nineteen blessings divided into three sections: praises (or hymns), petitions, and thanksgivings. As Elbogen describes them: “the first three benedictions form a hymnic introduction; the final three are a conclusion with thanksgiving; and the thirteen middle ones contain petitions. The first and last section are in use every day of the year without change … the middle section is in use only on weekdays, while on Sabbaths and festivals the petitions are replaced by a difference passage.” Additionally, there are a number of motions and practices that are meant to accompany the *Amidah*, including requirements that it be recited while standing and that it be recited in a whisper barely audible even to the one reciting it (although, during the morning and afternoon services, there is also a communal repetition of the

55. Ibid., 16.
56. Ibid.
59. At an earlier stage in its development there were just eighteen blessings, earning it the name *Shemoneh Esrei* (“Eighteen”). Though a nineteenth blessing was added at a later date, it is still commonly known as the *Shemoneh Esrei*. See, Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 24-25.
One prayerbook commonly used in some Orthodox communities provides the following note for the worshiper preceding the text of the Amidah:

While praying, concentrate on the meaning of the words. Remember that you stand before the Divine Presence. Remove any distracting thoughts, allowing the mind to remain focused on prayer. Before beginning the Amidah, take three steps back, then three steps forward. Recite the Amidah quietly—but audibly—while standing with feet together. Throughout the Amidah … interruptions of any form are forbidden.

As this passage shows, these practices are often shaped by the idea that during the Amidah the worshiper is directly encountering God. This common understanding is also reflected in the requirement to bend the knees and bow at specific moments during the Amidah as if one were addressing a monarch.

During the morning and evening services, the Amidah is preceded by the Shema. The Shema is one of the oldest parts of the liturgy and is composed of three central texts that are taken from the biblical books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, and that are preceded and followed by a number of blessings and praises. The central moment in the Shema is the declaration of the biblical verse “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One,” expressing a monotheistic belief in God’s oneness and supremacy. This line is stated loudly and in unison with the congregation. Later in this thesis, I will also be concerned with the first blessing preceding the Shema during the morning service, known as the Yotzer Or (“Creator of Light”) blessing.

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61. Ibid., 24.
64. Specifically, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41.
65. Elbogen, Jewish Liturgy, 17.
66. Mangel, Siddur Tehillat HaShem, 42.
Although prayer can be performed individually, there are some aspects of the liturgy that require the presence of a minyan. In the context of communal prayer, a minyan is traditionally a quorum of ten Jewish males who are above the age of thirteen, although many denominations have begun counting women as well.\(^{68}\) Without a minyan present, there are certain parts of the liturgy that cannot be performed, such as the Torah service or the communal repetition of the Amidah.\(^{69}\) The term minyan can also refer to a prayer community outside of their specific gathering during prayer, as we saw in the case of Kaunfer’s independent minyanim.

While most of the elements of prayer discussed here exist in some form as part of every Jewish denomination, the performance of the full traditional liturgy is generally associated with Orthodox Judaism. Although Orthodox Judaism possesses neither a unified ideology nor a centralized institutional structure, it can be roughly divided into two broad groups: ultra-Orthodox Jews, or Haredim (“those who tremble” before God), an assortment of movements that distance themselves from modern culture in order to lead what they take to be fully traditional Jewish lives; and Modern Orthodox Jews (the group associated with Soloveitchik), who hold more positive views of modern life and seek to balance a commitment to participating in modern society while adhering to traditional Jewish law.\(^{70}\)

One key point that distinguishes most forms of Orthodox prayer from other denominations is gender. While Orthodox Jews generally understand the obligation to pray as

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being universal, the requirement to participate in the daily communal prayer services outlined above is traditionally held to be incumbent only upon men.71 According to many in the Orthodox community, even if women voluntarily decide to attend communal prayer services, traditional Jewish law requires that they sit and stand separately from men and do not play public roles such as leading prayer or reading from the Sefer Torah.72 By contrast, most non-Orthodox American denominations, such as the Reform and Conservative movements (often referred to as the liberal Jewish denominations), embrace full gender egalitarianism. The synagogues in these denominations have mixed-gender seating and allow women to read from the Sefer Torah, lead prayers, and serve as rabbis.

72. Prell, Prayer and Community, 275.
This chapter will examine Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s understanding of prayer. I will argue that, for Soloveitchik, the proper performance of traditional Jewish prayer enacts a process of subject formation that is particularly important given his understanding of modernity and the challenges it poses. I will begin in Part One by discussing how Soloveitchik’s ideal subject possesses the skills, habits, and commitments that allow him to dialectically engage in both “majestic gestures” and “acts of sacrifice.” In Part Two I will examine Soloveitchik’s account of the way in which modern society’s obsession with success makes it uniquely difficult for man to engage in acts of sacrifice and become an ideal subject. In Part Three, I will conclude this chapter by describing how Soloveitchik imagines prayer as forming such subjects by teaching individuals how to engage in the sacrificial motion while simultaneously participating in modern majestic endeavors.

A NOTE ON GENDER AND PRAYER IN SOLOVEITCHIK’S THOUGHT

While it is clear that the ideal subject envisioned by Soloveitchik can be either male or female, the precise role prayer plays within the process of forming women into these ideal subjects is not clear. According to Soloveitchik, prayer seems to be experienced in similar ways by men and women: in both cases, the individual encounters God. Although the traditional obligation for women to pray is a general one, lacking the specific details that are required for men (such as performing prayers at certain times), Soloveitchik seems to hold that women should perform the same liturgy as men. Consider, for instance, his reaction to the fact that,
the 1970s and 1980s, Orthodox women began organizing all-female communal prayer services
that left out the parts of the liturgy requiring a minyan, since (as noted in the introduction) a
minyan traditionally requires at least ten men in most Orthodox contexts.\(^1\) Although Soloveitchik
states that these prayer groups do not technically violate Jewish law, he claims that if a woman
chooses to pray in a communal setting rather than by herself at home, it is better that she pray in
the presence of a minyan of men so that she can perform the full liturgy.\(^2\) To choose instead to
enact a partial liturgy is to intentionally choose a lesser form of worshipping God.\(^3\) Thus,
Soloveitchik envisions women as performing the same liturgy as men, though (following
tradition) he does not claim that they need to do so at the set times or with the same level of
regularity.\(^4\) Women can choose to either attend prayer services at the proper times of day, or pray
on their own at whatever time is convenient for them. Since the liturgy is the same, the
experience of performing it would therefore, presumably, have a similar effect on the worshiper.
However, as I will show, the regularity with which men are required to pray has a specific
disciplining effect that helps form them into ideal subjects. Since women are exempt from
praying three times a day and at the set times it is less clear as to the role prayer plays in forming
them into ideal subjects.\(^5\) Although a path to resolving this tension may lie in the many writings

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1. Zev Eleff, “The Modern Orthodox Women’s Agenda, the Eighties, and Bottom-Up
3. Ibid. Even though these all-female groups provide Orthodox women the opportunity to lead
prayer services and perform other roles normally reserved for men, for Soloveitchik, the ability
to lead prayer does not give one more access to God. Rather, prayer becomes tainted when
making a political statement takes precedence over worshiping God in the best way possible.
4. See note five below.
5. Soloveitchik’s nephew Moshe Meiselman claims that “in [Soloveitchik’s] view, women are
obligated to pray three times daily, as are men.” If this is true, then the account of subject
formation I present here would be the same for both men and women. However, this is not
that are either untranslated or as yet unpublished, based on the sources that I have reviewed I
cannot at this time discuss with confidence how Soloveitchik envisions the role of prayer in the
lives of women. I can, however, confidently describe how Soloveitchik sees the role prayer plays
in forming men into ideal subjects. Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter I will be using the
general term “man” as well as masculine pronouns when discussing the ideal subject and the
individuals involved in prayer, following Soloveitchik’s own usage. I will use more inclusive
terms when discussing his general account of human experience and his general critique of
modernity, yet the sources I quote necessitate occasional reversions to masculine language.

PART ONE – SACRIFICIAL ACTS AND MAJESTIC GESTURES:
SOLOVEITCHIK’S VISION OF THE SUBJECT

Throughout his writings Soloveitchik claims that one of the most important tasks of man
is to create himself as a full being:

God wills man to be a creator—his first job is to create himself as a complete being. …
Man comes into our world as a hylic, amorphous being. He is created in the image of
God, but this image is a challenge to be met, not a gratuitous gift. It is up to man to
objectify himself, to impress form upon a latent formless personality and to move from
the hylic, silent periphery toward the center of objective reality. The highest norm in our
moral code is: to be, in a total sense, to liberate oneself from the bondage of a shadowy
mé on [non-being] (to use Platonic jargon) and to move toward the wide spaces of ontos
on [true being], real true being, full of song and joy, the crystal-clear accents of speech.
Man was commanded to redeem himself in order to attain full being. This can be
achieved only through prayer.6

Prayer is cast here as the primary act by which “man” is able to “create himself as a complete
being”—to form himself into a particular type of person. This gets to my first key point: for
Soloveitchik, prayer is a mode of what I described in my introduction as subject formation. More

precisely, as I will soon show in greater detail, prayer is part of a process that results in the creation of an ideal subject with certain skills, habits, and commitments. As we will see, there are two aspects to this. On the one hand, Soloveitchik presents a complex account of human experience in general. On the other hand, he also tells a story of how only the experience of prayer forms the subject in such a way as to result in the creation of what he takes to be an ideal subject. I will save the latter point for the end of this chapter; in this opening section I will tackle the first point by examining Soloveitchik’s account of human experience in order to better understand the ideal subject he imagines.

As we will see, the ideal subject is a man who is able to engage in what Soloveitchik calls the “majestic gesture” (a mode of activity oriented toward successfully fulfilling desires that improve the quality of human life), while simultaneously engaging in what are described as “sacrificial act[s]”—acts by which this individual willingly refrains from pursuing certain desires and thereby conforms his behavior to God’s will. This is a subject able to engage in a “dialectical movement … in two opposite directions — in surging forward boldly and in retreating humbly.” In short, the ideal subject is one who engages in the dialectical motion of “sacrifice” and “majesty.” According to Soloveitchik, the divine will “teaches that at every level

7. The term “majestic gesture” can be found in Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” 51. Though Soloveitchik describes this mode of action as the “creative gesture” in both “The Lonely Man of Faith” and “Majesty and Humility,” I will use “majestic gesture” in order to emphasize its connection to the “majestic community,” which I will examine later. I take the phrase “sacrificial act” from Soloveitchik, “Community,” 15.
9. A reader familiar with Soloveitchik will note that, despite its prevalence elsewhere in his work, my use of “sacrifice” to describe the backwards motion of the dialectic is not the label he uses in works like “Majesty and Humility” and “Catharsis” that outline the dialectical motion in detail. However, for the purpose of this thesis I am only interested in his understanding of dialectical motion as it relates to the ideal subject he imagines being formed by prayer. Since, as I will show, it is clear from “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” that in prayer this motion is experienced as an act of sacrifice, “sacrifice” is a more apt term for describing the way individuals voluntarily engage in the backward dialectical motion than the more impersonal
of our total existential experience—the aesthetic-hedonic, the emotional, the intellectual, the moral-religious—one must engage in the dialectical movement by alternately advancing and retreating.”

In order to illuminate how this divinely willed motion is reflected in each “level” of the ideal subject’s experience, I will begin by explicating Soloveitchik’s account of human experience in general through an analysis of two concepts that are crucial to his work: “gesture” and “awareness.” Not only will this discussion help us understand the dynamic underlying the “sacrifice” and “majesty” dialectic, this account of human experience will also prove vital in the final part of this chapter for understanding how prayer works to form ideal subjects.

**Human Existential Experience: Awareness and Gesture**

A perusal of any of Soloveitchik’s writings reveals his fascination with the way humans experience both themselves and the world. In particular, if we pay attention to the language he uses, we notice that the words “gesture” and “awareness” appear throughout such accounts. My analysis of the way he uses these terms will provide the framework for explaining his general account of human experience—an account that will help us to then better understand the motion between sacrifice and majesty that his ideal subject is able to dialectically enact. Before starting, I will briefly offer the following definitions. For Soloveitchik, “awareness” denotes a condition in which the conscious mind is reflecting upon present reality, on what is or on what is terms he uses such as “humility” or “defeat,” which are ineffective for illustrating the way this dialectic is supposed to be reflected in human action.

10. Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” 44.
11. Though this dynamic that I will outline in the next few pages is not explicitly stated by Soloveitchik, I contend that it accurately represents his understanding of these terms given the way he uses them throughout his written work.
not being experienced in the moment.\textsuperscript{12} Put differently, to be aware means having some aspect of experience immediately present to the conscious mind. Furthermore, all awareness is “existential” in that it is always an awareness of existence—in that it is always an awareness of how an individual is existing in the world.\textsuperscript{13} “Gesture,” in turn, refers to a mode of action, whether involving the body or involving cognitive or emotional processes, aimed at attaining something that awareness shows is lacking in the present.\textsuperscript{14} In other words, to gesture means to actively strive towards achieving some future goal. Thus, the future-oriented gesture arises from and is guided by a present awareness of lack. As we will see, there are four types of existential awareness: physical (aesthetic) awareness, intellectual awareness, emotional awareness, and the depth crisis, or depth crisis awareness.\textsuperscript{15} Each of type of awareness then gives rise to a corresponding gesture: the aesthetic-hedonic gesture, the cognitive-intellectual gesture, the emotional gesture, and the moral-religious gesture, respectively.\textsuperscript{16} In the following pages I will

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12}“Awareness” appears regularly throughout Soloveitchik’s writings. I have used this term as a way to replace the word “experience” when used in a passive, reflective sense. This will be instrumental for illustrating the way awareness can guide sacrificial acts. Therefore I base my understanding of it on the following passages from “Catharsis” (among others): “in the moral-religious sphere withdrawal is identical with the awareness of imperfection and sin,” 52 n17; “Catharsis of religious life consists exactly in the awareness of the long interludes during which man finds himself at an infinite distance from God,” 53; “In the aptitude of man to take a critical look at himself and to admit failure,” 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{13}Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship of the Heart}, 28-35.
  \item \textsuperscript{14}This definition is abstracted from the various places where he uses this term, such as “The Lonely Man of Faith,” “Majesty and Humility,” and especially “Catharsis.”
  \item \textsuperscript{15}With the exception of the depth crisis, these terms are a combination of the existential levels of experience cited earlier from “Catharsis” 44, combined with my understanding of the term awareness defined earlier. Rather than use the term “levels of experience” or “realms” as Soloveitchik does, I chose awareness in order to emphasize their relationships to gestures that I will flesh out in this section. The term “depth crisis,” or “depth crisis awareness” is one that appears primarily in \textit{Worship of the Heart}, especially pages 30-36.
  \item \textsuperscript{16}Similar to the previous note, these gestures came from combining the aforementioned levels of experience with the understanding of gesture noted earlier in order to emphasize the actions taken out of these various levels of experience. The exceptions being the “cognitive-intellectual gesture,” and the “aesthetic-hedonic gesture.” The phrase “cognitive gesture” is found in “Catharsis” 50. I have added the term “intellectual” in order to highlight its connection to the
\end{itemize}
examine the relationships between these various elements in order to flesh out a portrait of the dialectical motion enacted by Soloveitchik’s ideal subject. As I will demonstrate, the forward motion of the dialectic (the majestic gesture) is motivated by an awareness of lack in the present and the backwards motion of the dialectic (an act of sacrifice) is guided by an awareness of the finite limits of our gestural abilities.

I will begin with the basic fact that humans exist. For Soloveitchik, the essence of each human existence is the *ontos*, or “being.” This *ontos* “is a spark of divinity” that came from the act of creation whereby God willed part of his infinite being to contract itself into finite substance.\(^{17}\) In fact, all things that exist are retractions of the infinite being that is God.\(^{18}\)

Furthermore, Soloveitchik claims that God’s being and the divine will are one and the same.\(^{19}\) In other words, the retraction of God’s infinite being into finite substance is an expression of the divine will to exist in the realm of concrete reality.\(^{20}\) Thus, all of concrete existence is an expression of the divine will. According to Soloveitchik, there are two aspects to this will: the cosmic-natural laws that determine the physical aspects of reality such as matter and substance, and the ethical-moral laws that should guide behavior.\(^{21}\) As physical beings, humans automatically conform to the natural-cosmic aspects of the divine will. Bound to the laws of nature and biology, humans are therefore driven by “biological, instinctual pressures.”\(^{22}\) Over

\(^{17}\) Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” 52-53.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 122-125.


\(^{21}\) Soloveitchik, *Worship*, 138, 123.

time, though, we have evolved a powerful intellect that gave us the capacity to reflect upon the experiences of our physical bodies and the environments through which they move.

This is the source of all of our forms of existential awareness in that, through reflecting on our experiences, they become immediately present to our consciousness. Through this reflective capacity, for example, humans became aware of all the sensations, drives, and instincts that come from biologically existing as living bodies. Having sensations such as pain, pleasure, hunger, fatigue, and other such physical experiences immediately present to the conscious mind constitutes physical or aesthetic awareness—that is, awareness of what the senses are experiencing. Furthermore, this reflective capacity also allows humans to learn from their experiences, to gain knowledge. For Soloveitchik, “knowing is not an impersonal performance which can be computerized, emptied of its rich, colorful, experiential content” rather, it “sweeps the whole of the personality,” and is “an integral part of the knower as a living person, with all his complex emotional experiences and axiological judgements.” That is, we are aware not only of our physical experiences, but also more abstract ones such as values, emotions, and facts. Having such knowledge as facts, ideas, or values immediately present to the conscious mind constitutes intellectual awareness, while having knowledge of the emotions we are experiencing immediately present constitutes emotional awareness.

However, in any given moment, those experiences that are the most immediate to one’s awareness are privileged. For example, Soloveitchik defines physical or aesthetic awareness “in

23. “By the aesthetic, I understand the all-inclusive human experience by virtue of which one apprehends oneself and the surrounding world as an immediate, constant contact with reality at the qualitative, sensible level.” Soloveitchik, Worship, 42.
25. This is my own analysis, concluded from what was already discussed concerning awareness and levels of experience.
terms of an immediate, constant contact with reality at the qualitative, sensible level.”

This immediacy means that one’s attention is constantly drawn to different aspects of physical existence. If I am working outside I am able to both chop wood while excitedly telling a squirrel about the battle of Agincourt. However, every time my axe gets stuck in a knot I lose track of the story. This is because the immediacy of this physical experience takes priority over the more abstract knowledge of this battle. Thus, the immediacy of physical experience means this type of awareness occupies human consciousness much more frequently than forms of awareness stemming from the more subjective, inner realms of experience.

Awareness, moreover, is not just awareness of what is present, it can also be an awareness of what is absent. For example, a physical awareness that there is presently a box of Frosted Flakes in my hand may simultaneously be an awareness that this box is empty. Thus, awareness always involves a sense of finite limits. In other words, being tied to the present moment, awareness is always confined to reality as it is currently being experienced. I will return to this point later on. Sometimes this awareness of lack may be positive, for instance, after eating I might be aware that I am no longer hungry. However, if whatever is lacking is something that is needed, this awareness leads us to act in order to fulfill this need. In other words, awareness that something is lacking in the present gives rise to the forward motion of gesturing, of actively seeking out that which is needed. Soloveitchik claims that “in the aesthetic [man] expresses his craving for the hedonic, and in it he finds the fulfillment of his sensuality. The aesthetic gesture

27. “In the aesthetic world, unlike the intellectual world, there are no abstractions. Everything is tangible and approachable to man in aesthetic terms.” Ibid., 42.
28. I derive this in part from his characterization of intellectual experience in the following passage: “the cognitive experience contains not only the rapture of knowing but also the terror and awe of the great mystery of the strange and uninterpretable being.” Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” 51. Mainly though, this comes from his understanding of suffering as need-awareness, which I will soon discuss.
is a sensuous experience.” ²⁹ Therefore, physical awareness of lack gives rise to an aesthetic-hedonic gesture. This gesture tries to avoid pain and discomfort by seeking that which is pleasurable to the senses. ³⁰ Acts such as touching a soft fabric, recoiling from a flame, or gazing at a beautiful sunset, all express this basic gesture. However, this gesture should not be confused with the simple actions of the physical body, since the body can also be involved in gestures stemming from other types of awareness. Rather, it is when these bodily actions are guided by physical awareness that they are part of the aesthetic-hedonic gesture.

Yet because this gesture requires physical action, it must make use of the intellect which guides bodily motion. In other words, even a physical awareness of lack will end up requiring the use of what Soloveitchik calls the cognitive-intellectual gesture in order to achieve its ends. According to Soloveitchik, this gesture is humanity’s most powerful tool. ³¹ Not only is it responsible for controlling the specific motions of the body, it is responsible for gathering knowledge, as well as judging and organizing the knowledge that we acquire in order to make sense of the world we encounter. In a word, this gesture involves gathering, generating, and constructing knowledge that can be used to guide our actions. According to Soloveitchik, through this gesture the individual approaches the world as a “subject-knower” who “must contest a knowable object, subdue it and make it yield its cognitive contents.” ³² It is a relationship of domination, whereby the object of cognition is reshaped and reconstructed in order to fit into rational frameworks. For instance, if I become intellectually aware that I do not know how to make a frittata, I will engage my intellect in the search for a recipe. Guided by an

²⁹ Soloveitchik, Worship, 42.
³¹ Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” 46.
³² Ibid., 11.
awareness of where such knowledge can be found, the intellect directs the body to a cookbook in
order to successfully acquire this knowledge. Once gained, the awareness of this new
information will guide the intellect to decide the actions needed to make a frittata.

Therefore, although gestures can arise out of any awareness of lack, they will inevitably
engage this gesture in order to achieve their ends. For example, when I wake up the morning of a
job interview and gaze into the mirror, I become aware of the fact that my hair is terribly messy.
Out of this aesthetic awareness of my present lack of style and beauty, as well as an awareness of
the need to look presentable for this interview, my cognitive-intellectual gesture is engaged in
order to seek out ways to fix this deficiency by sorting through the knowledge I possess to
determine the appropriate style I should wear to a job interview and how to properly achieve this.
Out of this intellectual awareness I then decide on the proper course of action to take in order to
successfully style my hair in time for the interview. In this example, I engaged my cognitive-
intellectual gesture despite the fact that there was nothing lacking in the intellectual realm.
Though the intellect was involved, the gesture as a whole can be characterized as an aesthetic-
hedonic one since it arose out of an aesthetic awareness of lack.

According to Soloveitchik, this awareness of lack is experienced emotionally as
suffering. To illustrate this, I will briefly examine his discussion of how the biblical prophet
Moses helped redeem the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. He claims that before the moment in
the story when Moses defended a slave from the whip of an Egyptian slave driver, the slaves did
not experience suffering:

[The slaves] had lacked the need-awareness, and experienced no need, whether for
freedom, for dignity, or for painless existence. They did not rebel against reality; they
lacked the tension that engenders suffering and distress. The voice was restored to them
at the very instant they discovered, emotionally, their need-awareness and became
sensitive to pain in a human fashion.33

Framed in the terms I have been using in this section, before Moses taught the Israelite slaves that they should be free, they were not aware that there was something lacking in the present. It is this “tension” between an awareness of what is and what could be that “engenders suffering and distress.” Suffering then comes from emotionally experiencing this awareness of lack, or need-awareness. I suffer when I am emotionally aware that there is some need that is not currently being addressed in my present reality. Furthermore, the emotions associated with suffering can serve as the most powerful motivators for action. 34 In this sense, the emotions are, for Soloveitchik, the overlay that provide motivation for the intellect to engage in its gesture. For example, hunger may be felt as anger or restlessness, an emotional awareness that I am not content, and yet I would like to be content. If I feel that finding food might bring me the desired experience of contentment, my emotions motivate the intellect to search for food. In this way, the aesthetic-hedonic gesture arising out of an awareness of physical lack engages the emotions in such a way as to motivate the intellect through the promise of positive feelings. I am more likely to want to eat something if I think it will make me happy than I would if I merely know it is good for me.

In sum, in reflecting on our experiences, we are aware of our present reality. If we are aware that something needed in the present is lacking—whether this lack is felt physically, emotionally, or intellectually—we suffer and the emotional experience of suffering motivates our intellect to search for a way to fulfill this lack. Thus, awareness comes from reflection on present

34. I take the idea that emotions serve as a powerful motivator from the following passage: “Man is master over his own emotional world, capable of disowning feelings or emotions, however compulsive or powerful, if they seem to be disruptive; and, conversely, of assimilating redemptive emotion into his personality.” Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” 47.
experience, and *gesture* is a future-oriented striving for success and victory that arises out of the awareness of something lacking in the present.

With this in mind, we can now clarify one side of the dialectical motion that Soloveitchik takes to be crucial: what he describes as “majestic gestures.” For Soloveitchik, a majestic gesture is a gesture—a future-oriented striving for success—born out of awareness of some type of lack, often felt in the physical or aesthetic realm. For Soloveitchik, such gestures are “majestic” in the sense that they “aim at majesty or kingship.” He claims that “man is summoned by God to be ruler, to be king, to be victorious” by subjecting “nature to the needs of man,” and by establishing “a true and just society, and an equitable economic order.” Thus, for Soloveitchik, it was “through the medium of the creative majestic gesture,” consciously engaged in the pursuit of victory over his various lacks, that man has “gained mastery over his environment” and lives a dignified life, possessing a “glorious, majestic, [and] powerful existence.” Imagine, for example, that in order to avoid becoming homeless or living on the kindness of others, I go out and obtain a job so I can support myself. My work constitutes a majestic gesture in that it is aimed at providing me with a dignified existence. Now, say a plane crash leaves me stranded in the wilderness and a storm comes. Rather than resigning myself to sleeping on the cold, muddy ground at the mercy of a harsh environment, I build a shelter. This too is a majestic gesture. Arising out of a physical awareness that I lacked shelter, I engage in a creative process that allows me to attain some level of control over my own circumstances. Let us say that after I come home, I invent a waterproof emergency tent that comes packaged so tightly that it can be placed in any small emergency supply bag. My majestic gesture has improved the chances of

36. Ibid., 33-34.
others who might find themselves in a similar situation. Even the act of cooking the frittata in the earlier example was a majestic gesture aimed at achieving victory over hunger and improving my quality of life. Throughout the rest of this chapter I will, therefore, use the term “majestic” to describe this type of consciously undertaken forward gestural motion.

When we realize that the problems and lacks we experience are too difficult for us to overcome as isolated individuals, we consciously join together into what Soloveitchik calls the “majestic community” dedicated to collectively achieving victory and success in our endeavors. For example, I alone may be unable to find a cure for diabetes, but if I work together with other scientists in this effort, a collective majestic gesture may successfully find a remedy. Thus, a team of construction workers, an artist’s collective, an architectural firm, and even a local or national government all count as majestic communities since they are dedicated to the collective and conscious pursuit of success and victory in their particular areas. In other words, any time I go to work and try to achieve success in my career with the support of coworkers and others engaged in a similar majestic pursuit, I am participating in a majestic community. In fact, in addition to these particular communities, Soloveitchik considers society, or even civilization as a whole, to be a majestic community.39

It is this community that is responsible for all human achievements in art, technology, science, and culture, improving the physical experience and quality of life for humanity as a whole. These types of collective majestic gestures have allowed man to raise himself “above the primitive level of natural existence and grant him limited dominion over his environment.”

38. The term “majestic community” can be found throughout the latter half of “The Lonely Man of Faith,” where it is also referred to as the “natural community,” “work community,” or some composite of these terms.
39. See “Lonely Man of Faith.”
40. Ibid., 22.
Thus, these collective majestic endeavors are typically dedicated to improving physical existence—that is, they are typically guided by the physical or aesthetic awareness of lack. For example, the awareness that people are homeless due to unfair housing practices may motivate the creation of laws and regulations designed to help those in need and prevent further abuses. Humanity has, therefore, collectively advanced human knowledge in order to gain the tools necessary for achieving success and victory in all our endeavors. For example, a group of researchers and social workers may work together to acquire the knowledge needed to guide policymaking that would combat homelessness.

It is important to see that, for Soloveitchik, the pursuit of victory in this type of community is divinely willed and mandated. To pursue success in our majestic endeavors is an ethical act in imitation of God:

God is king of the world; man, imitating God, quests for kingship, not only over a limited domain, but over the far and distant regions of the cosmos, as well. Man is summoned by God to be ruler, to be king, to be victorious. Victory, as the most important attribute of kingship, is an ethical goal and the human effort to achieve victory is a moral one, provided the means man employs are of a moral nature.41

Soloveitchik is making two claims here. On the one hand, he is casting majestic endeavors as an imitation or enactment of God’s own pursuit of victory. On the other hand, he is reminding his readers that these majestic endeavors must use “means … of a moral nature.” That is, though the individual must pursue victory in his majestic endeavors, they must be shaped not only an awareness of lack, but by an awareness of what we should and should not pursue with our gestures.

Therefore, as we will see, the majestic gesture does not, for Soloveitchik, constitute the entirety of an ideal human life. Rather, on his account, the ideal life is one lived dialectically

41. Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” 33-34.
between the pursuit of victory through majestic activities, and what he will describe as acts of “sacrifice” that involve a different mode of activity. To understand the sacrificial half of this dialectic, we must first examine one further type of existential awareness and one further type of gesture: what Soloveitchik calls the depth crisis awareness and the moral-religious gesture.

Possessing the self-awareness to motivate and decide on a specific course of actions, humans have the free will to guide their own behavior. If you will recall, earlier I mentioned that anything that exists does so because the infinite being of God has retracted into a finite ontos according to the divine will, whose cosmic-natural laws shape its physical substance and whose ethical-moral norms determine its behavior. For Soloveitchik, the fact that humans possess free will means that we do not automatically follow the ethical-moral norms of the divine will that are meant to guide our actions.\(^{42}\) That is, while we cannot help but follow cosmic-natural laws such as the laws of physics, our capacity for choice means that we can decide not to follow God’s ethical-moral norms. Though God may wish that I refrain from eating certain foods, such as pork loin or lobster, two sorts of problems may arise. First, unless I am specifically told by someone else about this prohibition, I have no way of knowing that such foods are forbidden. Second, even if I am aware of this prohibition, there is nothing physically stopping me from deciding to eat such foods. Consequently, since our existence does not fully manifest the ethical aspect of the divine will, humans come into the world as ontologically incomplete beings—God’s infinite being not having fully retracted into our finite being. In a word, the human ontos is an incomplete existence.\(^{43}\)

\(^{42}\) Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship}, 136-139.
\(^{43}\) Though he does not state this outright, this incompleteness of being is apparent in his continual emphasis on self-creation and the common desire to find completeness of being, as is shown in the following passage: “While man is active in his quest of God, other things tend automatically towards Him. Man is a strange phenomenon in the universe. His duality makes him distinct. He is both mechanical nature and conscious personality, unconscious drive and
Since the *ontos* constitutes the basis of our subjective existence, the awareness of this fundamental lack is like the cosmic background radiation left over from the Big Bang: it is omnipresent and yet we are rarely attentive to the fact that it is there. This lack is usually understood through the framework of either our aesthetic, emotional, or intellectual awarenesses. For example, if I possess all that I desire so that there is never any physical lack in my awareness motivating a gesture, I may still feel something is missing. I may therefore experience this lack as boredom and will try to fulfill it through seeking out new aesthetic pleasures and experiences. Yet, for Soloveitchik, “experience, however flamboyant and captivating, does not promote the idea of self-discovery, self-realization and self-redemption; experience thus withers like the flowers in the field.”44 Thus, these ephemeral aesthetic experiences cannot fulfill this ontological lack I sense within me.45

According to Soloveitchik, the only way to fulfill this ontological lack and become a full being—a being who fully enacts God’s will—is through an experience that he calls the “depth crisis.”46 This depth crisis (also called “universal depth crisis awareness”) is a complicated experience that affects every aspect of our existential awareness. Rather than simply being an awareness of a specific emotion, or a distinct sensation, this is a total realization of the finitude of every aspect of human existence.47 It is “an experience of complete bankruptcy and failure, which stems from the deepest insight of man … into his own reality, fate and destiny.”48 This

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45. This description of aesthetic existence is summarized from ibid., 37-50.
46. Ibid., 32.
47. Ibid., 33.
48. Ibid., 31-32.
insight is the realization that “man is finite,” and that “whatever is finite is imperfect.”\textsuperscript{49} It is an awareness that I am a being who is only so tall, strong, or smart, who can live only so long and accomplish only so much. As Soloveitchik describes it:

Man desires infinity itself yet must be satisfied with a restricted, bounded existence. When he reaches out, he anticipates the endless and boundless, enrapturing himself with the vision of unlimited opportunities. At the hour of his achievement, however, he finds himself hemmed in by finitude. The anticipation and the realization lie in different dimensions. Man always loses the final battle.\textsuperscript{50}

Here Soloveitchik is pointing out that we sometimes find that our gestures are not endless, that they are in fact finite in their reach. The result is, therefore, a realization of our gestural limits. Furthermore, these limitations on my abilities mean that, despite the successes of the majestic community, I am often at the mercy of “environmental forces which are insensate, mechanical, and quite often not sympathetic to man and his aspirations.”\textsuperscript{51} In short, the depth crisis is fundamentally an experience of our utter finitude and total helplessness.

How does this experience allow us to fill this ontological lack and become full beings? This occurs because, according to Soloveitchik, it is only “out of [these] depths in which the individual finds himself” that he reaches out to “God in seclusion and loneliness,” and submit himself entirely to the divine will.\textsuperscript{52} Only by being brought to this complete awareness of our own impotence do we become ready to sacrifice our free will and submit ourselves fully to God’s. Yet this awareness is rarely immediately present for reflection; the depth crisis “is an inner, personal, clandestine, and undefined crisis which is not readily manifest to the eye; it is perceived only by thinking and sensitive persons [and] can be evaded, shunted aside by

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” 36.
  \item Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship}, 34.
  \item Ibid., 30.
  \item Ibid., 33.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
superficial people, who will thereby avoid being affected.”53 How, then, do we experience this crisis? According to Soloveitchik, “the awareness of distress manifests itself in a variety of experiences” that are “characteristic of everyday life.”54 That is to say, whenever there is a lack that I am unable to fulfill through my gestures, I may be forced to reflect upon my limitations. He goes on to claim that “reflection on these experiences, among others, brings man to an awareness of a need beyond that of the surface-crisis”—that is, when we reflect upon our own inability to fulfill some perceived lack, we become aware of deeper issues we are unable to resolve.55 Therefore, if we reflect deeply enough on our own limitations, we become more and more aware of all those things we are unable to accomplish. This reflection can continue cascading into deeper levels of awareness until we end up experiencing this depth crisis.

However, we typically do not engage in such deep reflection without something forcing us to do so. A normal awareness of limitations is not enough to prompt deep enough reflection, since I can usually engage in a gesture to try to transcend or ignore these limitations or join with others in a collective majestic endeavor to compensate for my individual limitations. For instance, if I am aware that I am limited in my ability to eat cereal because I lack milk, I will rarely stop and reflect on this fact. Rather, I will just go get some more milk. What is necessary, then, is for our gestures to reach their limits in such a way that we cannot help but confront our utter helplessness. That is, what is crucial is for me to have some experience in which I am forced to confront the fact that my limitations are not problems that can be overcome by further

53. Abraham R. Besdin ed., “Prayer as Dialogue,” in Reflections of The Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought, adapted from Lectures of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1993) 81-2. This source is collection of his essays adapted from his public lectures compiled that were compiled by students and admirers. Therefore, I have been very cautious about including quotations taken from this book. However, there are occasions where this source states something much more succinctly than can be found elsewhere.
54. Soloveitchik, Worship of the Heart, 37.
55. Ibid.
striving, but rather are unavoidable, irreparable features of my existence. As Soloveitchik states:

“The reason for man’s failure lies in the discrepancy between his creative fantasy and the objective means of self-fulfillment that are at his disposal. While his boundless fantasy expresses itself in accents of endless desire and vast activity, the tools with which he tries to accomplish his goals are limited, since they belong to the finite order of things and forces.”56 Our failures, therefore, remind us that there are some lacks that we simply can never overcome. If I lack something that my awareness tells me I am powerless to change, or if some event occurs that leads me to consciously hold back from engaging in the gestural motion, then the possibility opens up for further reflection; my attention is forced to remain on this awareness.

An example will, once again, be helpful. Imagine that I am walking my dog when suddenly a car loses control and before I can react—tragedy strikes. My beloved family pet is no more. In the days that follow I am constantly aware that my dog is no longer immediately present in my physical experience. It is too soon to get another dog and both the majestic community and I lack the ability to bring my old one back to life. I cannot engage in any sort of gesture to resolve this feeling and I cannot ignore this physical and, therefore, immediate awareness of lack that remains constantly at the forefront of my consciousness. As I reflect on this lack, powerful emotions begin to stir and I experience suffering. In other words, when gestures fail, when they reach the limit of their abilities, they recoil into an awareness of the present. In turning away from the constant outward gestural striving, my focus is fully oriented to my own present existence and I am forced to reflect upon my own finitude and impotence. For Soloveitchik, such experiences “are illustrative of the manner in which all human beings are brought to the awareness of the depth-crisis.”57

56. Ibid., 34.
57. Ibid., 37.
In short, the depth crisis comes from the experience of defeat and failure. Through our gestures we strive to be victorious and successful in all our endeavors, to fulfill our desires, and to experience “times of joy and elation” when we feel “drunk with life” and “that living is a dignified air.” In such moments of success, man forgets the “unalterably cruel reality … that man never emerges victorious from his combat; total triumph is not in his destiny.” The fact that we are finite mortal beings means that these happy times will inevitably be followed by “moments of agony and black despair” when our gestures fail, and we are reminded of our inability to forever avoid the experience of suffering, that there will always be needs beyond our reach. At such moments, “living becomes ugly and absurd, plainly nauseating … [and] man loses his sense of beauty and majesty.”

This sense that there are some fundamental needs that we are utterly unable to fill means that the depth crisis is an experience of profound suffering: “whenever a merciless reality clashes with human existential awareness, man suffers and finds himself in distress [a word that Soloveitchik uses interchangeably with crisis].” However, even though our gestures may be unable to address whatever specific lack we experienced that precipitated this deeper reflection, the deeper awareness of the depth crisis reveals the fundamental lack within our own ontos that arose from our not manifesting the ethical aspects of the divine will.

58. Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” 32.
60. Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” 32.
61. Ibid., 32-33.
63. I should distinguish here that the depth crisis awareness of our finitude is not the same as the awareness of this fundamental lack. Rather, since the depth crisis comes from reflecting on our entire existence, it allows us then to realize that there is something fundamental missing. That is to say, the awareness of lack that motivates our gestures is not the same as the awareness of our finite limits that comes with the failure of our gestures. Even if we were complete beings, we would still be finite and could still experience this crisis. Suffering though, can come from both an awareness of lack and an awareness of limits; in that, I suffer because I lack something that I
The gesture that arises from this depth crisis awareness is the moral-religious gesture.\textsuperscript{64} It is through this gesture that we strive to fulfill this existential lack and create ourselves as full and ontologically complete beings. However, we typically do not understand this lack for what it is. It is an emotional \textit{awareness} of lack, but \textit{“there is not yet a clear understanding of what one is … lacking.”}\textsuperscript{65} That is, although we have become aware, in a depth crisis, that something is profoundly lacking, we do not typically grasp the true nature of this lack: our failure to fully reflect God’s will. It is generally experienced as an awareness that \textit{“we lack a compass that would guide us along the uncharted lanes of the world of values and facts.”}\textsuperscript{66} That is to say, we do not intrinsically know who we are and what values should be guiding our behavior; hence the “moral” part of its name. It can also come from reflecting on the vast, “grisly emptiness and chilling cruelty pervading the uncharted lanes of the universe; encumbering, vast, almost endless distances … [that are] cool, mechanical and devoid of meaning.”\textsuperscript{67} We feel like \textit{“a tiny speck, floating in a vast sea of brute thinghood and mechanical existence,” lacking existential “roots and anchorage.”}\textsuperscript{68} Experiencing this vast cosmos, we are intellectually confronted with our own creatureliness, finitude, and the meaninglessness of existence. Imagine spending years working...
to get into medical school, guided by the idea that being a surgeon is the greatest career one can have, only to discover that you not only hate the actual experience of working in a hospital, but that you lack the necessary skills to even become a surgeon. Feeling totally adrift, lacking a value to guide your actions and give you a sense of fulfillment, you begin to search for a new value to guide your life. You might decide that if you cannot heal people, you can at least make them laugh. Taking this as your new value, you start taking steps to become a comedian. The moral-religious gesture is therefore often understood as an intellectual search for a value that can guide behavior and give meaning and purpose to our lives. According to Soloveitchik, “to experience a value, to undertake the great venture of realization and possession, translates itself into the metaphysical act of self-realization within the ontic dimension of attaining self-worth and existential dignity, of ascertaining my own status as a being.” In a word, the moral-religious gesture constitutes a “conscious” and “meaningful movement towards the attainment of self-being.”

However, this is also a religious gesture because, according to Soloveitchik, the search for “self-being” is ultimately a search for “Divine Being.” He claims that, “to realize God as the highest value, to attain Him, to possess Him”—that is, to partake in his being—“is to realize one’s own being, to possess one’s own existence and to reconstitute and reform it.” That is to say, whether we realize it or not, the search to fill this gap in our being is actually a search for God, because only by taking God as the ultimate value will our behavior manifest the ethical aspect of the divine will, and only then will God fully retract into our ontos, filling the

69. I take the idea that a value can give ontic fulfillment from ibid., 138.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid., 134.
fundamental lack in our existence. Indeed, it is this point that will be crucial when we turn to prayer at the end of this chapter. In the quotation with which I began this discussion, Soloveitchik claims that the attainment of “full being … can be achieved only through prayer.”

He takes prayer to serve this function because, from his perspective, “the basic function of prayer is … the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of God and man.” Therefore, as we will see in the last section, prayer is able to generate a momentary depth crisis that motivates a forward-moving moral-religious gesture which is explicitly religious, orienting us to God, rather than to some other source of meaning, such that we fully submit ourselves to the divine will.

Hopefully by now I have made clear the importance of the depth crisis for this discussion. In order for Soloveitchik’s individual to fully submit to the divine will, he must be brought to this fundamental awareness of his utter helplessness and finitude which will motivate his moral-religious gesture to seek out a “relationship with God.” Thus, the individual must not run away from this experience, rather, “he should deepen and accept it.” Soloveitchik is suggesting here that the individual must be able to honestly acknowledge the numerous ways in which his gestures fail. That is, since the awareness of helplessness involved in the depth crisis comes from the experience of the failure and defeat of our gestural strivings, whereby we become aware of the finite limits of our abilities, the individual must be able to willingly acknowledge defeat if he is to have any chance at experiencing this type of crisis. He must “possess the capability of withdrawal,” that is, he must be able to willingly recoil his gestures into an awareness of their limits—to step back from his striving for success and dwell in his failures, to stop trying to

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74. Soloveitchik, “Redemption,” 64.
75. Soloveitchik, Worship, 35.
77. Soloveitchik, Worship, 32.
overcome the limitations of his abilities and, instead, honestly reckon with them.\textsuperscript{78} This withdrawal, this recoiling of our majestic gesture, constitutes the other side of the dialectical motion that Soloveitchik takes to be key: what he calls an “act of sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{79} According to Soloveitchik, “Jewish thought has always understood the act of sacrifice as the surrender of something which man’s multifarious biological and imaginative appetites crave.”\textsuperscript{80} Thus, it is through acts of sacrifice that the individual voluntarily withdraws his gestural strivings. This withdrawal then can allow him to become totally aware of his finite limitations, and therefore aid him in discovering and deepening this depth crisis awareness. For Soloveitchik, “the very gesture of falling before God and acknowledging His unlimited sovereignty and man’s utter impotence, constitutes an act of sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{81} The “very essence” of the individual’s “ontic awareness is thus an exercise in crisis, a process of growth in the experience of crisis.”\textsuperscript{82} In other words, since it is not easy to experience this crisis at its deepest level, the individual must continually engage in these acts of sacrifice in order to cultivate this awareness.

Paradoxically, for Soloveitchik, the only way to \textit{fully} submit oneself to the divine will in the depth crisis is for the sacrificial acts that bring it about in the first place to be performed in a manner that accords with this will. On this view, an individual can only submit to God in a direct encounter, and it is only when this individual fully manifests the divine will that God contracts into his \textit{ontos} and becomes accessible to experience. In other words, the individual must first submit his actions to the divine will in order to then submit himself fully to God in the crisis this initial sacrifice precipitated. Since we do not intrinsically know how to sacrifice according to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” 46.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Soloveitchik, “Reflections on the Amidah,” 168-169.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 175.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship}, 32.
\end{itemize}
Siary, Joshua—Chapter One

divine will, we first need to learn the norms of this will. Consequently, in order for man to learn how to sacrifice properly, God revealed the ethical-moral norms of his will to the Jewish people, with whom he entered into a covenantal relationship. Thus, it is only by participating in this type of community—what Soloveitchik terms a covenantal community—that the individual learns how to engage in sacrificial acts.

Furthermore, sacrifice is important not only because it plays a key role in bringing about the depth crisis, but also because the divine will to which this crisis leads me to submit requires me to engage in further sacrificial acts. Soloveitchik claims that “man must not always be victor. From time to time triumph should turn into defeat.” The divine will not only “encourages man to pursue greatness, vastness, to experiment daringly with his liberties, to search feverishly for dominion” as a member of the majestic community, it will also “command man to halt, and to make an about-face.” That is, the divine will also imposes limits on our striving, allowing us to engage in some pursuits but forbidding us from engaging in others. Thus, according to Soloveitchik, the divine will “teaches man how to conquer and how to lose, how to seize initiative and how to renounce, how to succeed, how to invite defeat, and how to resume striving for victory.” In a word, while in the majestic community man “must know how to fight for victory,” man must also learn “how to suffer defeat” by withdrawing his gestures from their pursuit of victory in an act of sacrifice—in an act of recognizing that there are activities that the divine will prohibits him from pursuing. Man, Soloveitchik insists, must also be part of a covenantal community dedicated to sacrifice and submission to God’s will.

84. Ibid.
86. Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” 44.
87. Ibid.
SOLOVEITCHIK’S IDEAL SUBJECT

What we have seen so far is that, for Soloveitchik, the ideal life is one that involves a dialectic between majestic gestures and sacrificial acts. We must engage in majestic gestures that attempt to fulfill whatever needs are lacking in the present, but we must also engage in the sacrificial acts that allow us to withdraw from our pursuits and realize our limits in a depth crisis that will bring us to submit ourselves fully to God’s will, which will in turn guide us to further sacrificially withdraw from majestic pursuits forbidden by God.

Indeed, this dialectic is a recurring theme in Soloveitchik’s writings. For example, he writes that “in every one of us abide [these] two personae,” and that “rejection of either aspect of humanity would be tantamount to an act of disapproval of the divine scheme of creation.”89 Recall, for instance, his claim that, humans should imitate God in “quests for kingship” and “victory,” but these pursuits must involve “means…of a moral nature.”90 Soloveitchik, we saw, is calling on us to pursue majestic endeavors, casting them as an imitation, or enactment of God’s own pursuit of victory. On the other hand, he is reminding his readers that these majestic endeavors must use “means … of a moral nature.” That is, though the individual must pursue victory in his majestic endeavors, they must be shaped not only an awareness of lack, but by an awareness of the “moral”—that is, by the ethical-moral norms of the divine will. Majestic endeavors, in other words, should be carried out in a way that reflects our sense of what God requires of us. Consider, as well, the following passage, in which Soloveitchik claims that man must never reject this dialectical motion, and that he must always remember his finitude even as he strives to transcend his limitations.

90. See my earlier discussion of Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” 33-34.
Man was called on to defy opposition on the part of nature and to march to victory. … Yet, when conquest is within man’s reach and the road to realization has been cleared of all hindrances, man-victor, who needs only to reach out and grab everything his heart has anxiously desired, must change his course and begin to withdraw. When victory is near, man must invite defeat and surrender the spoils that he had quested for so long. The movement is dialectical: forward-marching ends in retreat, which, in turn, leads to a resumption of the forward-march. 91

In an experience of sacrifice and total submission to God, the individual is aware of the divine will within him and this awareness can shape his majestic gesture, teaching him in what areas he should strive for victory, and in what areas he should accept defeat. In short, “the norm which originates in the covenantal community addresses itself almost exclusively to the majestic community where its realization takes place.” 92 If, for example, I am a fashion designer and I am aware that the divine will forbids me from killing animals outside of food or self-defense, I may insist that my clothing lines only use fur or leather that comes from animals slaughtered for food. Or, if I am aware that that the divine will demands that I help the downtrodden, I may direct my efforts to becoming a civil rights lawyer.

In fact, Soloveitchik claims, enacting the divine will helps man “strengthen [the] cultural edifice” of the majestic community. 93 For example, by relating the ethical system of laws and norms created by majestic man—that is, man when he acts as a member of the majestic community—to “a higher moral will,” the laws can gain “fixity, permanence, and worth.” 94 If laws are perceived to come merely from the decisions of individuals enacting them based on the whims of popular opinion, they may inspire less obedience than laws perceived to come from God. Thus, when enacted in the majestic community, these laws provide “meaning and

91. Soloveitchik, “Catharsis,” 44.
93. Ibid., 59.
94. Ibid., 58.
directedness to human existence.”\textsuperscript{95} The ultimate goal, then, is to shape the majestic community to conform to the divine will, thereby “uniting the two communities into one community where man is both the creative, free agent, and the obedient servant of God.”\textsuperscript{96} Thus, Soloveitchik claims that God desires man’s life to be a “steady oscillating between the majestic natural community and the covenantal faith community,” between a life dedicated to improving humanity’s existence in the world and a life dedicated to sacrifice and conforming to God’s will.\textsuperscript{97} Man’s experience constantly “swings like a pendulum between [these] two poles.”\textsuperscript{98}

The preceding analysis, then, has made clear that Soloveitchik understands that, ideally, man should engage in sacrificial acts that acknowledge his finite limits, while simultaneously engaging in the majestic enterprises that seek to transcend these limits. I would suggest, then, that what we have seen is Soloveitchik providing us a vision of what I have described in the introduction as an ideal subject—a vision of an individual who has come to acquire a specific set of skills, habits, and commitments. This vision is of an individual who is committed to enacting God’s will in every aspect of his life, who is habituated to always remaining aware of the limits this will imposes on the sort of actions he is able to perform, and who is skilled at withdrawing from those activities that the divine will prohibits while simultaneously pursuing those goals it commands him to seek in a way that demonstrates his awareness of ethical norms. Soloveitchik’s story about human existence is, in part, a story about an ideal subject.

\textit{PART TWO} – \textit{DENYING THE DIALECTIC: MODERNITY’S “DEMONIC” OBSESSION WITH SUCCESS}

\textsuperscript{95} Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” 22.
\textsuperscript{96} Soloveitchik, “Lonely Man of Faith,” 51.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{98} Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” 26.
One of the themes that recurs throughout Soloveitchik’s writings is a concern with what he sees as the problems unique to modern life. The central problem for Soloveitchik is that the successes of the modern majestic community have undermined man’s ability to engage in acts of sacrifice that willingly acknowledge our limitations. As we will see, this is because modern majestic man has rejected the dialectical mode of existence outlined above—the life lived between sacrificial and majestic endeavors—and committed himself exclusively to the majestic pursuit of success. In other words, modern man has mistakenly identified success as the ultimate value by which he should guide his behavior.

Though the majestic community has always been one marked “by the indomitable desire for success and triumph,” the modern period, especially the twentieth century, “has witnessed the greatest triumphs of majestic man in his drive for conquest.”99 For example, Soloveitchik notes the fact that “man of old … succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness.”100 By contrast, today I can go to the doctor and get vaccinated for all kinds of illnesses. He also points out that in the past it took days to travel from Boston to New York, but today one can board a plane in New York, and “several hours later” take “a leisurely walk along the streets of London.”101 Our technological and scientific advancements have made us the supreme masters of our environment, and there seems no limit to what we can now accomplish. Modern man is so “mesmerized by the infinite number of opportunities … [that] he forgets the simple tragic fact that he is finite and mortal, and that to reach out for infinity and eternity is a foolhardy undertaking.”102 Modern man has therefore become “intoxicated with his own adventures and victories” and in his arrogance, has tried to claim “unlimited power,”

100. Ibid., 14.
101. Ibid.
aspiring “to complete and absolute control of everything.”

103 In a word, the modern period has conditioned man to over-rely on the majestic gesture and to therefore deny the validity of sacrifice: in Soloveitchik’s words, modern man is “determined not to accept the dialectical burden of humanity.”

104 Put differently, no longer used to the experience of failure, man has become deluded into thinking that his gestural reach is infinite. Therefore, he avoids reflecting too deeply on his awareness in the present which might reveal the uncomfortable truth that both he and his abilities are finite. In order to avoid this existential awareness, man turns his focus away from the present as much as possible and always engages the future-oriented majestic gesture. He must always be “moving straightforwards … along an unbroken line of mechanical life-activities, never turning around, never glancing backwards, leading an existence which is neither fraught with contradiction nor perplexed by paradoxes.”

105 Man’s life becomes “determined by biological immediacy and mechanical necessity,” knowing “no responsibility, no opposition, no fear, and no dichotomy, and hence is free from carrying the load of humanity.”

106 For example, an unchecked aesthetic-hedonic gesture engages man in an endless pursuit of physical pleasure. The hedonist never allows himself much time to reflect upon his experiences before running off in pursuit of yet another transient sensual experience. Thus, the modern subject avoids and denies the existential awareness of his own finitude by orienting his focus always toward endless gain. As Soloveitchik puts it, “modern man is frustrated and perplexed because he cannot take defeat. He is simply incapable of retreating humbly.”

107 I will begin by looking at the consequences of the unchecked aesthetic-hedonic gesture on man’s ability to

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104. Ibid.
106. Ibid.
accept defeat in general. I will then examine the consequences of the unchecked cognitive-intellectual gesture for man’s ability to engage in sacrificial acts that involve submission to God’s will.

According to Soloveitchik, modern man is an aesthete, a “beauty-worshipper, committed to the goods of sense and craving exclusively for boundless aesthetic experience.” Since physical awareness is always the most immediate, a significant portion of modern majestic endeavors are oriented towards improving physical experience by eradicating pain and discomfort and providing as much opportunities for pleasure as possible. Modern society has thus made it very easy for the individual to always indulge whatever it is his aesthetic-hedonic gesture is seeking. For example, after eating his dinner, our hedonist may crave a Milano cookie. If he has run out of this food, he does not stop to reflect on the fact that he can never find lasting pleasure, that his existence is marked by an unceasing and unreflective pursuit of these transient experiences. Rather, he immediately engages his majestic gesture and seeks out these cookies, hopping into his car and obtaining some from the store. It is precisely this sort of modern convenience—that is, the ability to always and easily find those things we want—that has conditioned the modern subject to the unchecked gestural pursuit of infinite indulgence and gain. Soloveitchik is suggesting that people are so accustomed to always succeeding in obtaining the things they want, that they do not even want to think about the fact that they will not always be successful: they simply “cannot take defeat.” With their gestural reach rarely reaching its limits, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for people reflect on their present limitations.

The intellectual-cognitive gesture has become especially conditioned towards infinite indulgence, for it was through this gesture that humanity was successfully able to “gain

supremacy over the objective order.” The successes of this cognitive-intellectual gesture has conditioned modern man to think that he can make sense of everything, that his intellectual reach is infinite and that everything can be made to fit his rational categories. However, for Soloveitchik, the experience of sacrifice and submission to God is fundamentally irrational and “resists subservience” to the cognitive-intellectual gesture’s attempt to rationalize and translate it into an object of practical social value. Therefore, rather than acknowledging that there might be value to this experience beyond the rational categories of modern society, modern religion has discarded such aspects of the faith experience that are not instrumentally useful to the endless quest for success and happiness.

This is because modern man only “values religion in terms of its usefulness to him and considers the religious act a medium through which he can increase his happiness.” No longer encompassing the whole of one’s life, religion becomes restricted to the synagogue or church, set apart as an escape from the mundane world. Subsumed under the aesthetic-cultural domain,

12. Ibid., 57.
13. Indeed, for Soloveitchik, it is not only the ideal subject, living between majestic and sacrificial modes, who is threatened by modernity. Rather, in his account, Judaism itself is threatened by modern life. The issue here is the new historical situation in which Jews find themselves: the fact that they live as a minority that, having at long last been granted civil rights, are newly able, as a community, to fulfill their majestic duty by standing “shoulder to shoulder with mankind preoccupied with the cognitive-technological gesture for the welfare of all.” Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” 17. On the one hand, some parts of the Jewish community, fearing the negative influences of an increasingly secular culture, “retreat quickly into seclusion.” Ibid. Thinking that, by avoiding modern culture, they can remain always close to God, they strive to live a pure life away from the majestic community. Other Jews, though, in experiencing an unprecedented level of access to the wider culture, consider their dual commitment to both the majestic and covenantal communities “too great a burden, interfering with [their] pursuit of happiness and success, and [are], therefore, ready to cast it off.” Soloveitchik, “Lonely Man of Faith,” 56. In other words, this second group of Jews, participating in modern society, are pressured to privilege the needs demanded by the majestic endeavor over that of the needs learned in the covenantal community. Though placing their commitment to the majestic community first, these Jews do not necessarily reject Judaism. Rather, for them,
man turns to religion seeking “not the greatness found in sacrificial action but the convenience one discovers in a comfortable, serene state of mind. He is desirous of an aesthetic experience rather than a covenantal one, of a social ethos rather than a divine imperative.”  

Thus, modern man “wants to be successful even in his adventure with God. If he gives of himself to God, he expects reciprocity.”  

In sum, modern life has reoriented the way man engages in religious practice. Furthermore, for Soloveitchik, the true faith experience is being dialectically aware of not only one’s closeness to God, but also “of the long interludes during which man finds himself at an infinite distance from God.”  

In thinking that one can be religious without experiencing this distance, this alienation, in thinking one can possibly live a morally perfect life, and that such an impossible achievement is going to bring ultimate happiness, modern man “lives in the world of illusion.”

In sum, by adopting success as the ultimate value, modern man has lost sight of—and even rejected—the importance of sacrificially withdrawing from the pursuit of his desires. Modern technological advancements have made it harder for man to experience the limits of his abilities, disciplining him to an unreflective life spent in a delusional pursuit of success in every endeavor. By continuously evading a confrontation with the reality of human finitude, modern society has made it uniquely difficult for man to engage in the sacrificial motion that will allow him to submit to the divine will and transform himself into the ideal subject.

Judaism, as with all religion in the modern period, becomes a cultural identity and is placed on the same level as any other human activity.

115. Ibid., 64.
117. Ibid.
PART THREE – SUBJECT FORMATION IN THE SHEMA AND THE AMIDAH

It is a commitment to restoring modern man’s ability to engage in sacrificial acts and majestically pursue success without becoming deluded into thinking his abilities are infinite that, I will suggest, animates Soloveitchik’s account of prayer. For Soloveitchik, prayer is able to train man to recoil his gestures and experience a profound depth crisis that fully commits him to a sacrificial submission to the divine will, while simultaneously showing him how to properly engage in majestic gestures. Prayer, in other words, forms the individual into an ideal subject. Soloveitchik identifies this process as taking place in two consecutive sections of the traditional Jewish liturgy, the Shema and the Amidah.

THE SHEMA

As I noted in the introduction, the Shema is composed of a selection of texts from the Torah surrounded by a number of blessings and praises. For Soloveitchik, the experience of the worshiper during this prayer is described as “accepting the yoke of Heaven.”118 The Shema will begin the process by which the individual commits himself to the divine will, a process that will be completed in the Amidah. In order to commit himself to this will, the individual’s intellect, which controls and decides behavior, must first properly identify God as its guiding value. As we will see, the words of the Shema guide the worshiper to this intellectual acceptance of the divine will as the true and ultimate value by which he should live his life, reversing the mistake modern man makes in taking success as the ultimate value. Thus, in the Shema, an individual engages in the moral-religious gesture—in a gesture which seeks a relationship with God—with the result

118. Soloveitchik, Worship, 133.
that he identifies God as the ultimate value and intellectually commits himself to enacting the divine will in every aspect of his life.\textsuperscript{119}

For Soloveitchik, since the ethical-moral norms of the divine will are weighty and complex, the commitment cannot be anything less than passionate, and passion is rooted in the aesthetic awareness, for “[only] beauty can be desired passionately, only loveliness can arouse enthusiasm and frenzy, and only the aesthetic experience may turn into an intoxicating drink, into a madness.”\textsuperscript{120} Thus, in order to arouse passion, the moral-religious gesture of the \textit{Shema} harnesses the aesthetic gesture and directs it toward the sublime, exalted beauty of God.\textsuperscript{121}

Therefore, the first blessing of the \textit{Shema} recited during the morning service, \textit{Yotzer Or} (“Creator of Light”), begins by beautifully describing God’s creation of the sun, the moon, and the stars before transitioning into the following description of angels worshiping God in the heavens:

All open their mouths in holiness and purity, with song and psalm, and bless, praise, glorify, revere, sanctify and declare the sovereignty of — The name of the great, mighty and awesome God and King, holy is He. All accept on themselves, one from another, the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, granting permission to one another to sanctify the One who formed them, in serene spirit, pure speech and sweet melody.\textsuperscript{122}

This powerful imagery evokes both the sublime beauty and majesty of the cosmos and the numinous feeling of God’s utter transcendence and distance from humanity. The aesthetic-hedonic desire to experience the sublime beauty of God becomes at the emotional level a profound feeling of love whereby the participant yearns to reunite with the infinite source of his being. For “when the good is apprehended as the beautiful, it arouses emotions of a different

\begin{footnotes}
\item[119.] Ibid., 133-134.
\item[120.] Ibid., 61.
\item[121.] For in depth discussion of the “sublime” and its relation to aesthetic experience, see ibid., 51-72.
\item[122.] Sacks, \textit{Koren Siddur}, 92. I am unsure why this translator placed a dash at this moment, but it is also present in the translation offered in Mangel, \textit{Siddur Tehillat HaShem}, 40. It may just signify that a new paragraph is beginning without any resolution to this sentence, as a way to build up to and emphasize the next verse.
\end{footnotes}
kind—craving for communion and contact, a desire to share in God’s charitable works and for following His laws and guidance.”

Thus, this love motivates an intellectual search for specific ways to come close to the infinite source of being that is God, thereby filling the void of an incomplete ontos. The depiction of an all-powerful, infinite, and distant God reminds the worshiper of his own helplessness and finitude. Thus, the aesthetic experience of this passage generates a momentary experience of the depth crisis that lasts long enough to motivate the moral-religious gesture to seek out God.

The words are then able to guide the intellect in this moral-religious search for a value by leading it to connect the natural order (represented by the sun, the moon, and the stars) to the transcendent order (represented by the angels) so that the individual realizes that both are expressions of the same divine will. Furthermore, the words reveal to the individual the fallaciousness of modern divisions between sacred and secular realms, emphasizing the need to conform to the divine will in all his endeavors rather than just in the context of prayer. Thus, the worshiper is guided to declare in the central text of the Shema:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom for ever and ever. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today, shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and

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124. Soloveitchik himself does not mention the depth crisis during his discussion of this blessing, focusing instead on the unity of the divine will this expresses, as I state in the next paragraph. However, in his discussion of the third blessing of the Amidah, which I will come to soon, where God is depicted in similar terms, he claims that such depictions of God emphasize these qualities related to the depth crisis.
125. “Both the stars, acted upon by mechanical forces, and the angels, motivated by love and awe of God, are instruments of the absolute ethico-cosmic will.” Soloveitchik, *Worship*, 131-132.
they shall be for a reminder between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the
doorposts of your house and upon your gates.\footnote{127}{Mangel, \textit{Siddur Tehillat HaShem}, 42.}

The central phrase of the \textit{Shema}, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One,” is a
statement of God’s oneness and the unity of God’s will.\footnote{128}{Ibid., 16.} Traditionally, the individual declares
this sentence loudly and in unison with the entire congregation. In doing so, the individual is
engaging in a moral-religious gesture that leads him to intellectually accept “the absolute,
universal and eternal authority of God” in every aspect of his life.\footnote{129}{Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship}, 88.}
In the rest of the text quoted above, the worshiper then proclaims his commitment to fulfilling these norms in every setting
and at all times, whether traveling or at home, whether in the morning or in the evening. In sum,
the words of the \textit{Shema} guide the worshiper to accept the divine will as the true and ultimate
value by which he should live his life, thereby “accepting the yoke of Heaven.”\footnote{130}{Ibid., 133.} Thus, we can
see how the moral-religious gesture involved in the \textit{Shema}, engaging both the intellectual and
aesthetic gestures, leads the participant to acquire the knowledge of the ultimate value by which
the intellect should guide behavior.

Yet by intellectually acknowledging that the divine will is greater than his own free will,
the worshiper simultaneously becomes aware that there are limitations to his free will, which
itself comes from the intellectual gesture. “The commandment of \textit{Shema},” Soloveitchik writes,
“requires … an inner act of surrender to the will of the Almighty.”\footnote{131}{Joseph B. Soloveitchik, \textit{Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships}, eds. David Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky (MeOtzar HoRav, 2000), 40.} In other words, when the
worshiper has succeeded in finding the ultimate value to organize his life, the intellectual gesture
retreats into a reflective intellectual awareness of its own limitations. Thus, the moment of victory is at the same time a moment of defeat and surrender. The *Shema* ends in an act of sacrifice in that by accepting the divine will as the ultimate guide for behavior, the individual withdraws his intellectual gesture, sacrificing his free will and submitting his intellect to God. Furthermore, insofar as the *Shema* invokes the people of Israel, and insofar as the worshiper recites this commitment in unison with other participants, the individual establishes himself as a member of the covenantal community dedicated to enacting the divine will through acts of sacrifice.

Though the subject has intellectually committed and sanctified himself to submit to God’s will, he does not (according to Soloveitchik) yet have the total commitment necessary to enact the divine will in every aspect of his life. Only the intellect has, as yet, submitted itself to God’s will through engaging in the sacrificial motion and recoiling its cognitive gesture. For Soloveitchik, however, an intellectual commitment is not enough. The total commitment to God “is rooted not in one dimension, such as the rational one, but in the whole personality of the man of faith. The whole of the human being, the rational as well as the non-rational aspects, is committed to God.” For Soloveitchik, the only way to fully commit to the divine will is to experience God “in the throbbing of the heart and the longing of the soul”—that is, as a part of oneself. Only conforming to the divine will in every aspect of one’s existence allows the *ontos*, the totality of one’s existence, to fully reflect the divine will; only then does God’s infinite

132. For Soloveitchik, this is especially reflected in the fact that there are commandments that make no logical sense. He claims that “man defeats himself by accepting norms that the intellect cannot assimilate … [he] ignores the logos and burdens himself with laws whose rational motif he cannot grasp. He withdraws from the rationalistic position.” Soloveitchik, “Majesty and Humility,” 37.
being become fully retracted into finite substance allowing the worshiper to experience the
divine will as part of himself, motivating him to continue enacting this will in every area of life.
Since this encounter can only occur within the covenantal community, in establishing the
worshiper as a member of this community, the Shema positions the individual to approach God
during the very next stage of the liturgy, the Amidah, where this process takes place.135

THE AMIDAH: PERFORMANCE AND PRAISES

The Amidah is the central prayer for Soloveitchik. As I described in the introduction, this
prayer—which is recited while performing a number of physical actions such as bowing and
taking steps forwards and backwards at its beginning and conclusion—is composed (at least in
its weekday version) of nineteen blessings divided into three sections, beginning with praises,
turning to petitions, and ending with thanksgiving.136 Soloveitchik describes the inner experience
of the worshiper during the Amidah as “service of the heart.”137 As I will show, these physical
performances, together with the experience of reading the praises, engage the worshiper in an act
of total sacrifice that both brings him into direct contact with God and facilitates a powerful
experience of the depth crisis. For Soloveitchik, service of the heart entails experiencing an “all
embracing awareness of standing before the Almighty.”138 Yet this experience of God cannot
simply be the intellectual awareness that is provided by the Shema, but is rather “an immediate

136. Though Soloveitchik sees the thanksgivings as an essential part of the Amidah, he takes
them to merely build on what occurs in the petitionary portion by further orienting the worshiper
back to the majestic community. Therefore, for the sake of space, I will end my discussion after
the petitions. For his discussion of the thanksgiving portion, see Soloveitchik, Worship, 28, 64-
72; as well as idem., “Reflections,” 148, 175-181.
137. Soloveitchik, Worship, 94.
reality” that must be felt and encountered in every type of awareness.\textsuperscript{139} Thus, as we will see, the physical performance of the \textit{Amidah} and the experience of reading the praises at the beginning engages every gesture in a sacrificial recoil, orienting the focus of the worshiper away from his future gestural strivings and towards the present, resulting in full existential awareness of his finite limits—that is, the depth crisis. Furthermore, Soloveitchik claims that “the service of the heart is the integration of … [the] value [gained in the \textit{Shema}, namely, the divine will] into the human being’s life in all areas, from the lowest instinctual level to the apex of spiritual being.”\textsuperscript{140} Thus, as we will see, it is during the first section of the \textit{Amidah} that the individual fully conforms each aspect of his conscious existence to the value attained in the \textit{Shema}, namely, the divine will.

\textit{Performance: Aesthetic-Hedonic and Intellectual Recoiling}

According to Soloveitchik, “only the aesthetic experience … may bring man directly into contact with God, living, personal, and intimate.”\textsuperscript{141} Since physical, aesthetic experiences are the most immediate to human awareness, there are various physical actions and behaviors that must accompany the performance of the \textit{Amidah} in order to lend “immediacy and sensuousness” to the religious experience.\textsuperscript{142} For example, Jewish tradition requires that the worshiper pray in a proper location, that he “be dressed appropriately,” while standing with “correct posture” and facing “towards Jerusalem and the Temple Mount.”\textsuperscript{143} The worshiper must also “modulate his voice properly,” and “perform the required genuflection,” kneeling and bowing at the appropriate points in the prayer.\textsuperscript{144} Furthermore, tradition outlaws all “distractions and intermissions,”

\textsuperscript{139} Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship}, 63.
\textsuperscript{140} Soloveitchik, “Reflections,” 165.
\textsuperscript{141} Soloveitchik, \textit{Worship}, 59.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 100-101.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 101.
forbidding the worshiper from interrupting the prayer even to greet a king.\textsuperscript{145} All of these physical experiences are attempts to engender in the worshiper “a very solemn and yet a humble mood.”\textsuperscript{146} By dressing, standing, acting, and bowing in these formal ways, the worshiper gains the impression that he is in the audience of someone of incredible importance. Through these motions the individual is made to understand that prayer “is a difficult and extremely serious business, requiring attention, discipline, concentration, alertness, tension, humility, and awe.”\textsuperscript{147} Although the blessings of the \textit{Shema} preceding the \textit{Amidah} presented beautiful descriptions meant to engage the aesthetic-hedonic gesture in the forward motion in order to arouse the emotions, in the \textit{Amidah} the aesthetic-hedonic gesture engages in the backwards motion of sacrifice and self-defeat. In enacting these often difficult and uncomfortable actions, the worshiper exerts control over his aesthetic-hedonic gesture, recoiling it from the endless search for comfort and physical pleasure and submitting it to the divine will. Thus, the worshiper is forced to be acutely aware of the limits of his actions, of what he can and cannot do.

With the physical and intellectual realm both engaged in this reflective awareness, the individual then focuses on reading the words of the text. In the very first line of the \textit{Amidah}, the worshiper states “God, open my lips, let my mouth utter Your praise.”\textsuperscript{148} For Soloveitchik, this forces the worshiper to acknowledge that without the words of the \textit{Amidah}, prayer is impossible. Thus, right at the beginning, the intellect, already in recoil from the \textit{Shema}, is forced to acknowledge its further failure to come up with the words capable of addressing God. Confronted with the apparent impossibility of the finite encountering the infinite—of the human encountering God—in prayer, the individual is forced to acknowledge that there are things it

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145. Ibid., 102.\\
146. Ibid.\\
147. Ibid., 102-103.\\
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cannot understand, and the cognitive gesture is further recoiled into an awareness of the limitations of its understanding. Thus, in reading the words of the Amidah, the worshiper has sacrificed his own ability to speak, and has submitted his intellect to the divine will of God. Rather than gesturing outwards seeking to make sense of this conundrum, the intellect instead reflects on what it is experiencing in the present, focusing awareness on the text of the Amidah. Thus, for Soloveitchik, the Amidah “is a meditative-reflective act.” 149

**Praises: Emotional and Moral-Religious Recoiling**

With the intellect reflecting on the text, the worshiper now reads the first three blessings of praise that begin the Amidah: *Avot* (“Fathers”), *Gevurot* (“Might”), and *Kedushat Ha-Shem* (“Sanctification of the Name”). As we will see, reflecting on these praises leads to a recoil of the emotional and moral-religious gestures, directing every aspect of awareness towards human finitude. In turning away from all future strivings, the Amidah generates a sacrificial recoil of the entire self. Thus, as I will show, these three blessings bring the individual to offer up his entire being in a total act of sacrifice that submits every aspect of his existence to the will of God. I will begin by examining each blessing before discussing how they lead to this sacrificial act and how this then facilitates an immediate awareness of God’s presence.

**Blessing 1: The Avot**

Blessed are You, Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob, the great, mighty and awesome God, exalted God, who bestows bountiful kindness, who creates all things, who remembers the piety of the Patriarchs, and who, in love, brings a redeemer to their children’s children, for the sake of His Name. O King, [You are] a helper, a savior and a shield. Blessed are You, Lord, Shield of Abraham. 150

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149. Soloveitchik, “Redemption,” 68.
In this first praise, the *Avot* (“Fathers”), the worshiper invokes his own mythical ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These patriarchs are depicted in the Torah as having close, personal relationships with God, to whom they prayed regularly. In praising God for remembering “the piety of the Patriarchs,” the individual reminds God of his commitment to protect the descendants of these patriarchs. This, for Soloveitchik, is an “appeal to historical precedent.”

In declaring himself a part of this lineage, the worshiper is reminding both himself and God of his right to approach his Creator with petitions. For Soloveitchik, the emotional experience of reading this blessing is one of confidence and affection. This is a God who is fatherly, protecting, full of lovingkindness, and who “will not hide His face from the individual who prays, even though the latter is hapless and unworthy of standing before Him.” This approachability means the worshiper feels “close to God.” Yet in the next two blessings of praise God once again grows distant.

**Blessing 2: Gevurot**

You are mighty forever, my Lord; You resurrect the dead; You are powerful to save. [Summer: He causes the dew to descend. | Winter: He causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.] He sustains the living with lovingkindness, resurrects the dead with great mercy, supports the falling, heals the sick, releases the bound, and fulfills His trust to those who sleep in the dust. Who is like You, mighty One! And who can be compared to You, King, who brings death and restores life, and causes deliverance to spring forth! You are trustworthy to revive the dead. Blessed are You, Lord, who revives the dead.

In this second blessing, *Gevurot* (“Might”), the worshiper praises the majesty and might of a God in whose hands sits the power of life and death. For Soloveitchik, the awareness of God’s might

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152. Ibid., 151.
153. Ibid., 155.
154. Ibid., 163.
155. The bracketed insertion indicates that the wording of this blessing changes depending on the season in which it is performed.
stands in contrast to an awareness of man’s own “frailty and helplessness.” The worshiper “discovers his emptiness, and begins to understand that he has no standing at all.” The individual who just felt empowered in the first praise by his ability to approach God as a descendent of the founding patriarchs is now made to feel radically inadequate, weak, and totally dependent upon God’s assistance. This is a God who is vast, majestic, and who created the cosmos. Compared to this mighty Creator, man is made aware of the finite limits of his own majestic strivings.

**Blessing 3: Kedushat Ha-Shem**

You are holy and Your Name is holy, and holy beings praise You daily for all eternity. Blessed are You, Lord, the holy God.

The last blessing of praise, Kedushat Ha-Shem (“Sanctification of the Name”), extols the holiness and awesomeness of a God that is utterly transcendent and mysterious. Whereas in the previous blessing, God was seen as part of the natural order, sending rain, healing sickness, and so on, in this blessing God is situated in a transcendent realm with other “holy beings” and has no apparent involvement in earthly affairs. Additionally, whereas in the first two blessings, God was seen as loving and caring, this God appears unemotional and unconcerned. The worshiper therefore experiences an “absolute separation” between himself and a God who is “impossible to approach.”

**Sacrifice and Community**

With this last praise, the worshiper has now arrived back where he was at the beginning of the Shema, where God was also depicted as inhabiting that distant and angelic realm. Thus, we can

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158. Ibid., 163.
159. Ibid., 156, 163-164.
see how prayer engages the subject in a dynamic of at times feeling close to God, and at other
times utterly distant from him. In the Shema, the moral-religious and emotional gestures engaged
in a motion that, reinforced by the first blessing of praise in the Amidah, gave the worshiper the
sense that he was close to a loving caring God. By the time we arrive at this last praise, the
worshiper has been brought back to a feeling of utter distance. These blessings emphasize man’s
inability to approach God on his own; just when he feels close, God recedes even further. With
the emotional and moral-religious gestures recoiled in recognition of the limits of his own
capacities, the worshiper is totally withdrawn from his future strivings: every aspect of his
awareness, in other words, is directed towards human finitude. Thus, the praises that initiate the
Amidah engenders the existential awareness of the depth crisis, the creatureliness and finitude
one feels when “gazing at the mysterium magnum of creation.”162 With every aspect of existence
engaged in the sacrificial motion, man offers up his entire being back to its infinite source,
surrendering all he is in a desperate attempt “to come close to God.”163 According to
Soloveitchik, by the last blessing, when the worshiper “praises the awesomeness of God, he is
prepared to surrender everything to Him.”164

This is what Soloveitchik means when he states that “prayer means sacrifice,” and that
prayer entails an “unrestricted offering of the whole self, the returning to God of body and soul,
everything one possesses and cherishes.”165 Prayer is an act of sacrifice in the sense that it is
enacted through recognizing that God is the ultimate value and that our own existence is
irredeemably finite compared to God. The sacrificial dimension of prayer is only further
heightened by the fact that it is performed in accordance with the divinely ordained norms

162. Soloveitchik, Worship, 28.
164. Ibid., 164.
outlined in the Jewish tradition: the Amidah’s praises and their accompanying actions, recited and performed according to the norms of the divine will, constitute a total act of sacrifice that submits every aspect of the self to the will of God. Since the worshiper now exists fully in accordance with the divine will, his ontos is complete and God has fully retracted into him. With every aspect of his awareness fully focused on his present existence, he becomes aware of God’s immediate presence. He becomes aware that “in each and every movement of one’s soul, every stretching of one’s muscle, God addresses Himself to man.” The existential awareness of God’s absence, felt just a moment earlier, now transforms into the religious experience as God becomes immediately present in his conscious awareness. In this direct encounter with an infinite God, “prayer drives finitude to its very boundary,” and the individual comes to see himself “as a slave of God” and as completely dependent upon Him. It is out of this sense of total dependence that petition arises, as man asks God to fulfill those needs he himself is utterly incapable of fulfilling. These petitions constitute the next section of the Amidah.

Before moving on to the petitions, though, it will be helpful to briefly summarize what we have already learned. For Soloveitchik, by performing the liturgy’s required actions and reciting the liturgy’s required praises, the subject recognizes his own radical finitude and sacrificially conforms his behavior to the divine will, thereby coming into direct contact with the infinite God during a renewed experience of the depth crisis. Indeed, it is worth noting that, Soloveitchik’s understanding that prayer can facilitate a connection to God that is otherwise impossible exhibits affinities with recent developments in ritual theory, most notably work by Sam Gill on the phenomenology of prayer. According to Gill, prayer achieves “the copresence of the impossible and the possible [by making] the world beyond the banal … copresent with the

166. Soloveitchik, Worship, 25.
ordinary.”¹⁶⁸ For Gill, “copresence” refers to a condition in which two or more things that logically cannot coexist are held together—that is, something like Soloveitchik’s notion of the finite co-existing with the infinite without being negated. In fact, Gill claims that copresences are the very sources of a religion’s vitality, in that by presenting that which is impossible as absolute truth, religion challenges human understanding and motivates an endless struggle to make sense of the resulting contradictions.¹⁶⁹ So too, as we will see in the next section, Soloveitchik sees something like the copresence of God and man in prayer as motivating action and vitalizing religious life.¹⁷⁰

**The Amidah: Petitions**

According to Soloveitchik, the petitionary section of the Amidah is the most important moment in the prayer experience. In fact, he claims that “the vigor and power of prayer derive[s] from petition.”¹⁷¹ The central importance of petition is demonstrated, for him, by the fact that these requests compose the bulk of the Amidah—thirteen blessings—while the praises and thanksgivings merely “serve as prologue and epilogue, respectively.”¹⁷² The importance of these petitions for Soloveitchik is twofold. On the one hand, these petitions express what he takes to be

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¹⁶⁹ My understanding of copresence—which Gill also calls “metastability”—comes from conversations with Sam Gill both in and out of the classroom, as well as from manuscripts he shared for his forthcoming books *Movement: A Philosophical Neurobiology of Vitality* and *Religion: Always Already the Moving Body*.
¹⁷⁰ The similarities between Gill and Soloveitchik do not end here. One of the most fascinating convergences I have noticed is between Soloveitchik’s notion of the role of time in repentance discussed in *Halakhic Man* (110-117), and Gill’s notion of the “Fat Present” discussed in chapter eight of *Movement: A Philosophical Neurobiology of Vitality*.
¹⁷² Soloveitchik, *Worship*, 11. See also the following passage: “Of the nineteen blessings in our [Amidah], thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions ([Retzeh] and [Sim Shalom]) are of a petitional nature. The person in need is summoned to pray.” Soloveitchik, “Redemption,” 65.
the central experience of prayer, namely, “the feeling of … complete, absolute, unconditional dependence upon God.” On the other hand, as I will show, these petitions teach man the needs he must pursue in the majestic community.

For Soloveitchik, “petition flows from an aching heart which finds itself in existential depths.” In other words, petitions arise out of the depth crisis awareness of the utter limit of human abilities that was achieved through the praises. In reading these petitions while in God’s presence, the worshiper is reminded that there are some needs that only God can fulfill, that there will always be some forms of suffering beyond man’s ability to prevent or alleviate, and that there will always be needs man is completely powerless to fulfill. According to Soloveitchik, the way prayer emphasizes the suffering of the depth crisis is essential, for God “expects prayer to rise from a suffering world cognizant of its genuine needs.”

However, the needs whose fulfillment one requests in the petitions do not arise from individual suffering; it is not the worshiper who is suffering in the moment. Rather, prayer is formulated in the plural, always expressed in terms of “we,” “us,” and “our,” for example, the second petition is phrased: “draw us near, our King, to Your service; and bring us back … in whole-hearted repentance.” God entered into a covenantal relationship with the community of Israel, instead of with any one individual. Consequently, in order to approach God in prayer, the worshiper must always speak on behalf of the Jewish community in which the worshiper was established during the Shema. This is because prayer phrased in the plural expresses “human solidarity and sympathy.” It expresses the fact that, “I am aware, not only of my pain, but of

173. Soloveitchik, Worship, 12.
174. Ibid., 28.
176. Mangel, Siddur Tehillat HaShem, 47 (emphasis added).
the pain of the many, because I share in the suffering of many.” 178 In other words, the plural phrasing of the petitions reminds the worshiper that “the I is responsible for the physical and mental welfare of the thou.” 179 It reminds him of his duties to not only pray, but to act in order to relieve the suffering of others through engaging in majestic enterprises.

Furthermore, Soloveitchik continues, not only do the petitions emphasize the experience of utter dependence upon God and the communal nature of suffering, these petitions also teach man what his true needs actually are: “Prayer in Judaism, unlike the prayer of classical mysticism, is bound up with the human needs, wants, drives and urges, which make man suffer. Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should, or should not, petition God about.” 180 In other words, these petitions provide the knowledge necessary for the intellectual gesture to determine those needs that are or are not worthy of petitioning God to fulfill. 181 Furthermore, since these needs are tied to worldly matters, they orient the worshiper back to the majestic community by teaching him what needs are actually worth pursuing with his majestic gestures.

What, then, are these needs that prayer teaches? Here is a shortened selection from each petition, numbered for the purpose of reference:

1. Graciously bestow upon us from You wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.
2. Draw us near, our King, to Your service; and bring us back … in whole-hearted repentance.
3. Pardon us … for we have sinned; forgive us … for we have transgressed.
4. Redeem us speedily for the sake of Your Name.
5. Grant complete cure and healing to all our wounds.
6. Bless for us … this year and all the varieties of its produce for good.
7. Gather our exiles, and bring us together from the four corners of the earth into our land.

179. Ibid., 19.
181. Ibid., 67.
8. Restore our judges as in former times … and reign over us … with righteousness and justice.
9. May You swiftly uproot, break, crush, and subdue the reign of wickedness.
10. Grant ample reward to all who truly trust in Your Name, and place our lot among them.
11. Return in mercy to Jerusalem Your city, and dwell therein as You have promised.
12. Speedily cause the scion of David … to flourish, and increase his power by Your salvation.
13. Have compassion on us and accept our prayers in mercy and favor.¹⁸²

For Soloveitchik, the first four petitions asking God for knowledge, repentance, forgiveness, and redemption emphasize the feeling of helplessness and teach the individual that he first needs to fully submit to the divine will. Petitions five and six, asking God for healing from physical illnesses and for agricultural prosperity, teach the individual that in addition to submitting to God’s will, humans also need to be physically healthy and find ways to sustain themselves.

Petitions eight, nine, and ten teach the individual that he and his fellow worshipers are obligated to create a just society where the righteous are protected and the wicked punished. Together with the previous two petitions, these words provide specific examples of those needs that man must pursue with his majestic gestures. Petitions seven, eleven, and twelve then teach the worshiper that the ultimate goal of their gestural strivings is to hasten the messianic era when, as many classical Jewish sources suggest, the descendants of the biblical King David will rule once again in Jerusalem; the Jewish people will return to Israel from their diaspora; and the ancient Temple will be rebuilt so that God will dwell once again on earth.¹⁸³

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¹⁸². Mangel, Siddur Tehillat HaShem, 47-50.
¹⁸³. Though Soloveitchik does not examine the specific petitions in the same way he does the praises, he provides the following summation: “The Amidah deals with the needs of this world: bodily health, fertility of the earth, sustenance, political needs of the nation in the land, ingathering of the exiles, restoration of judicial autonomy, the perpetuation of Israel’s sages, the building of Jerusalem, the restoration of Davidic kingship, and the like form the background of prayer in all its diversity.” Soloveitchik, “Reflections,” 175.
In its emphasis on worldly needs, these petitions show the individual that he must enact the divine will in the wider world rather than just in the act of prayer. The reading of these petitions, therefore, orients the worshiper back towards the majestic community by teaching him what is truly needed in the present and thereby providing the intellectual awareness that will guide his majestic gesture. As Soloveitchik claims, “prayer enlightens man about his needs. It tells man the story of his hidden hopes and expectations. It teaches him how to behold the vision and how to strive in order to realize this vision, when to be satisfied with what one possesses, when to reach out for more.”

Thus, the intellectual awareness of these needs will guide his actions, telling him what needs he should pursue with his gestures and when he should recoil them in sacrificial acts. Though the worshiper sacrificed himself entirely to God out of the sense of his own worthlessness and helplessness, he becomes aware that God does not want him to give up; God does not wish that the worshiper be negated in this encounter with the infinite. He finds that his “finite existence is not consumed by the infinite Divine Being. On the contrary, finite being gains strength and power” through this encounter. He discovers, then, that fulfillment of his true needs does not lie in the transcendent realm, it does not come from escaping reality and ascending to God; rather, “it is God who descends to man.” As Soloveitchik claims, “the service of God … can be carried out only through the implementation, the actualization of its principles [the ethical-moral norms of the divine will] in the real world.”

In reading these petitions, therefore, the individual realizes that he should strive to relieve the suffering of others by contributing to the construction of a just society where basic human needs are ensured, such as having access to healthy food and proper medicine, as we saw

187. Ibid., 94.
in petitions eight, six, and five, respectively. In short, the needs that are outlined in these petitions are consonant with the activities of the majestic community.

Furthermore, in experiencing the divine will within himself at this moment, the individual becomes “sure that the needs are his own,” and is, therefore, fully committed to the fulfillment of these needs in the majestic community and conforms his own will to the divine will. That is, aware of his finitude and helplessness, he can nevertheless confidently trust that he possesses an accurate understanding of what his needs are, for he has been assured of their content through prayer. Cognizant, then, of the needs he must pursue in his majestic endeavors, man leaves the prayer experience “firm, elevated and sublime, having found his redemption in self-loss and self-recovery.” The worshiper can now go back and resume his work in the majestic community guided by this awareness of “his paradoxical capability of being concurrently free and obedient.” This is the service of the heart achieved in the Amidah, whereby “the awareness of the unseen reality accompanies man through life” and guides his every endeavor.

Here too, we can perhaps detect points of contact with theories developed in the field of ritual studies. Soloveitchik’s notion that repeated prayer serves a didactic function that helps shape the individual bears similarities to Talal Asad’s study of medieval Christian monastics. Asad claims that these monks performed their daily rites not as symbolic enactments of abstract ideas or stories, but as a method of disciplining themselves to produce “virtuous” subjects over time. Another interesting resonance is with Catherine Bell, who claims that the purpose of ritual is to create a ritualized social body capable of deploying classificatory schemes that help
order and make sense of the world, schemes gained in the context of ritual. Prayer, for Soloveitchik, also inscribes classificatory schemes into the subject, schemes which this subject can then deploy outside of the prayer environment to help distinguish between those things he must pursue with his majestic gestures and those things from which he must withdraw. Lastly, Soloveitchik’s suggestion that true agency only comes out of submission rather than the ability to resist bears resemblance to Saba Mahmood’s study of Egyptian women’s movements. According to Mahmood, agency for these women was predicated, in a variety of ways, on submission to Islamic doctrine and practice, rather than on resistance to a perceived patriarchal hegemony. Like Mahmood, Soloveitchik, too, holds that there are modalities of agency other than the dominant model of resistance and subversion.

**Re-Forming the Modern Subject**

I will now tie this all together with one final illustrative example. Imagine an accountant for a major health insurance corporation. His career is demanding and competitive, and consumes most of his waking thoughts. In such a fast-paced, success-driven life, he has little time to reflect on his limits. Failure is avoided at all costs. To be sure, in the moments of failure that do inevitably occur, he becomes frustrated by his limitations. Nevertheless, this awareness is momentary as he is immediately occupied by yet another task, yet another job to do in this collective majestic endeavor. In a word, the majestic community in which he participates is not conducive to reflection, and he can easily forget his finite limits. With the amount of money that can be made in such a business, this individual can easily forget that his focus should be on

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195. Ibid., 153-188.
helping people pay their medical bills, and instead places the successful acquisition of money and power in this business as the only thing worthy of striving for.

Yet before heading out to pursue success in this majestic community, our accountant starts the day by heading to synagogue for the morning prayer service. Though he might enter the room thinking about the work day he has ahead of him—thereby engaging his future-oriented cognitive gesture—when he begins to pray, the immediacy of the aesthetic experience of reading the text out loud and physically performing the proper motions brings his awareness fully into the present as he focuses his intellect on the words of the text. At the beginning of the *Shema* he is momentarily reminded of his finitude, that whatever success he seeks in the majestic community will never be permanent, that his gestures can never transcend their finitude. He then turns away from this crisis experience by seeking a relationship with this transcendent and sublime God, thinking that if his career cannot bring ultimate fulfillment, perhaps God can. In reading the words of the *Shema*, he is then led to an intellectual awareness that only by following and submitting himself to the divine will in every aspect of his life can he achieve this closeness. He is reminded that success or money is not the ultimate value, rather, only God should serve as his moral compass. Yet in the first three blessings of the *Amidah* he feels increasingly distant from God, and the depth crisis is brought back as all those gestures engaged in the *Shema* are made to recoil once again. But paradoxically, in submitting himself entirely to the divine will through this sacrificial act of recoiling every aspect of his existence, he achieves the goal of his just withdrawn moral-religious gesture as he experiences God within himself. This experience then drives the depth crisis to its deepest. Aware of his utter helplessness in facing God, and experiencing the divine will as part of himself, he fully commits himself to this will.
When services are over and his commitments to the majestic community call him to leave synagogue and head to work, he reimmerses himself in the daily concerns of his business. Nevertheless, even though his attention is directed away from experiencing God in his ontos, he starts the work day with a fresh awareness of what the divine will demands of him. Once at work he is faced with the choice of either approving or denying a measure that would increase his profit margin but at the expense of certain benefits for new customers. With the experience of prayer still fresh in his mind, he recalls the petition, “grant complete cure and healing to all our wounds, for You, Almighty King, are a faithful and merciful healer.”196 Aware of what the divine will demands in this moment, and feeling committed to it from the experience, he tears up the proposal, withdrawing his gesture from the endless pursuit of success, aware of the limitations his commitment places on his actions. Though the pressures of his job may sometimes lead him to forget his priorities, Soloveitchik’s account suggests that prayer is there to regularly remind him that he is not meant to succeed in everything, that there are some cases in which God demands that he accept defeat. This accountant lives between majestic gestures and sacrificial acts, between the pursuit of success and victory on the one hand and withdrawal and submission on the other.

The example outlined above illustrates my central claim in this chapter: for Soloveitchik, the proper performance of traditional Jewish prayer enacts a process of subject formation that is particularly important given his understanding of modernity and the challenges it poses. For Soloveitchik, the ideal subject lives dialectically, engaging in both majestic gestures as part of a community dedicated to pursuing infinite success in all human endeavors, while simultaneously being able to withdraw from the pursuit of success through acts of sacrifice that demonstrate

196. Mangel, Siddur Tehillat HaShem, 48.
awareness of the finite limitations placed upon his gestures through adherence to the divine will. This subject is an individual who is committed to enacting God’s will in every aspect of his life, who is habituated to always remaining aware of the limits this will imposes on the sort of actions he is able to perform, and who is skilled at withdrawing from those activities that the divine will prohibits while simultaneously pursuing those goals it commands him to seek in a way that demonstrates his awareness of ethical norms. At the same time, Soloveitchik argues, modern life makes it difficult for man to engage in the sacrificial actions crucial to this dynamic. The solution, then, is prayer. On this view, the regular experience of prayer is able to train the individual to engage in this dialectical motion of advancing and retreating in every aspect of his life. The way prayer continually trains him to withdraw his gestures provides him the skills to also control his pursuits while participating in the majestic community. Furthermore, the experience of God in prayer, that is, the experience of the divine will fully manifest in his ontos, commits him to enacting this will in every sphere of his life as if it were his own. The awareness of what needs are worth pursuing in the majestic community that he learned in the petitions, combined with the ability and commitment to control his gestures, habituates him to always being aware of the finite limitations this will imposes on the sort of gestures in which he can engage. In short, then, what we have discovered is that prayer is able to form exactly the sort of individual with the skills, habits, and commitments that are constitutive of the ideal subject imagined by Soloveitchik. Prayer is able to form the individual into the ideal subject envisioned by Soloveitchik by restoring to the worshiper the skills, habits, and commitments—undermined by modern life—that allow him to live dialectically, majestically pursuing success while sacrificially withdrawing from this pursuit and acknowledging the finite limitations that characterize human existence.
CHAPTER TWO – EMPOWERING PASSIVE SUBJECTS: ELIE KAUNFER AND THE AESTHETICS OF PRAYER

This chapter will examine prayer in the work of Elie Kaunfer. I will argue that, for Kaunfer, the experience of participating in prayer—or, at least, properly constituted prayer—has the ability to help form certain types of subjects who will help reinvigorate Jewish life in America. Echoing my approach to Soloveitchik in the previous chapter, in Part One I will argue that the ideal subject imagined by Kaunfer—what he calls an “Empowered Jew”—is habituated to being actively engaged in Jewish worship and therefore comes to acquire a host of skills and commitments: for example, the skills necessary to participate in any role during worship services and a commitment to joining and forming communities that will both deepen these skills and habits and instill them in other individuals. In Part Two, I will then show how, for Kaunfer, poor worship aesthetics and a misguided editing of the liturgy have led to a crisis of engagement whereby Jews are discouraged from actively participating in, and have become emotionally disconnected from, worship, resulting in large numbers of Jews dropping out of Jewish life in general. In Part Three, I will conclude this chapter by showing how, when these aesthetic errors are corrected so that Jews are encouraged to participate in worship, the resulting type of prayer is able to generate a meaningful connection to God through the emotions, motivating worshipers to deepen their participation in communities where they can be become the type of “empowered” individuals who can reinvigorate Jewish life in America. Thus, I will show that, for Kaunfer, the experience of participating in a prayer service, properly performed, motivates a deeper involvement in Jewish communal life that allows the worshiper to gain the skills, habits, and commitments that constitute her as Kaunfer’s ideal subject.
A NOTE ON GENDER AND PRAYER IN KAUNFER’S THOUGHT

In contrast to Soloveitchik’s lack of clarity regarding the way prayer forms ideal subjects in the case of women, Kaunfer, as we will see, explicitly claims that gender differences have no effect on the way prayer forms his ideal subjects—the effects are the same regardless of the worshiper’s gender. In fact, he encourages women to take leading roles during worship services. Therefore, as a contrast with the male language of the previous chapter, I will use feminine pronouns throughout my discussion of Kaunfer. Yet, as we will see in Part Two, his embrace of a principle such as gender egalitarianism central to other liberal Jewish denominations extends only partially to liturgical changes based on such commitments, such as the addition of the names of women to prayers that traditionally mention only men.

PART ONE – THE “EMPOWERED JEW” AS THE IDEAL SUBJECT

In his publicly available writings and lectures, Kaunfer—unlike Soloveitchik—does not explicitly present an account of the subject or discuss the specific dynamics by which experience forms particular types of people. Nevertheless, in this section I will demonstrate that Kaunfer is very much interested in the formation of an ideal subject with a specific set of skills, habits, and commitments, a subject he calls an “Empowered Jew.” In his book *Empowered Judaism*, Kaunfer claims that Empowered Jews “are deeply engaged in traditional language and practice … and open to the wider world.”¹ As we will see, Kaunfer is here painting a picture of a

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¹ Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism*, 129. There is another aspect to Empowered Jews that I do not discuss in this chapter, namely, the fact that they are able to study sacred Jewish texts directly and without a mediator. While this is a characteristic feature of what it means to be an Empowered Jew for Kaunfer, this aspect is not connected to the way they are supposed to help empower others. In other words, only the “traditional practice” and “wider world” aspects are important given the critique we will examine in Part Two. Even within his own work he devotes
particular type of subject. This ideal subject is someone who is habituated to being actively engaged in prayer and who has come to acquire, and is committed to further developing, the skills necessary for this active engagement by participating in and “building communities and institutions that offer [this] direct engagement with Jewish life” and allow others to become empowered as well.\(^2\)

**Traditional Language and Practice**

For Kaunfer, to be “engaged in traditional language and practice” denotes the ability to recite the full liturgy, including prayer, in its original languages (primarily Hebrew), as well as the ability to perform whatever accompanying actions that may be required, such as the bowing and stepping during the *Amidah* that I noted in the introduction and discussed in the Soloveitchik chapter.\(^3\) These skills are important because, according to Kaunfer (based on his experiences with participants in independent minyanim), Empowered Jews believe “in the power of the traditional liturgy as a means of connecting to God,” and are not satisfied by passively relying on others to perform it on their behalf.\(^4\) These two points are critical. On the one hand, Kaunfer insists that “prayer is something that draws us close, that bridges a gap,” and allows us to come “nearer to that [divine] presence, that is so often distant.”\(^5\) On the other hand, this is an experience that is so vital that Empowered Jews take responsibility for performing it themselves. I will examine each of these points in turn.

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significantly more attention to prayer than anything else. Although studying sacred texts matters, it is through prayer that Jews are motivated to go out and gain the skills to do study these texts directly.

2. Ibid., 156.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 30.
Aesthetics and Emotion: Connecting to God through the Liturgy

Kaunfer claims that when an individual actively and properly performs the traditional liturgy, the aesthetic dimensions of prayer arouse this person’s emotions, allowing her to encounter and form a relationship with God. He suggests that, in prayer, we experience a “string of aesthetics” that has a specific “emotional effect” on the individual. By “string of aesthetics” he is referring to the way the structure of the traditional liturgy orders the performance of different prayers that each possess a distinct sound or sonic character rooted in factors such as their Hebrew pronunciation, the specific types of melodies according to which they are recited, and the specific registers of volume (and even sets of actions) with which they are associated. What Kaunfer is suggesting here is that the traditional Jewish liturgy is aesthetically structured so that the experience of performing this liturgy is able to engage the emotions of the individual in particular ways, and he claims that these “emotions … [are] inextricably linked to prayer.”

He then goes on to explain this relationship between prayer and emotions:

Has a prayer service ever moved you to tears? In some ways, I think this is the ultimate goal of prayer—to unlock some of the emotional space that is cordoned off by the modern world. Talmudic wisdom had a similar conception, claiming that since the destruction of the Temple, the gates of prayer are locked, but the gates of tears remain unlocked (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 32b; Bava Metzia 59a). When the prayer leader and the congregation believe that it is possible to unlock deep emotions in prayer, real, powerful prayer can take place.

What the above passage suggests is that, for Kaunfer, the goal of prayer is to provide a way for the worshiper to express deep emotions that are normally inaccessible. As he states elsewhere, “the question that we face in the prayer space is: are we going to let out those emotions? Are we going to channel those emotions through prayer, or are we going to bottle them up and remain

8. Kaunfer, Empowered Judaism, 111.
silent and not access them?” In fact, Kaunfer claims, by approaching prayer with a degree of vulnerability that allows the liturgy to engage the emotions and with a willingness to “open the heart” and express these affective states, the worshiper is able “to draw near to the presence of God that is so often hidden.” Kaunfer’s view, then, is that the aesthetics of the liturgy arouses the worshiper’s emotions in such a way as to facilitate an encounter with God, and that this emotional connection can occur only if the worshiper already exhibits a degree of vulnerability and openness—that is, if she already believes that “it is possible to unlock deep emotions in prayer.” In sum, Empowered Jews are able to approach prayer with the emotional vulnerability necessary for the resulting aesthetic experience to take them on an affective journey and encounter God.

Furthermore, in the previous quotation Kaunfer emphasizes that it is not only the individual worshiper, but also the congregation as a whole, that must approach prayer in this way. He claims that it is impossible to create the experience of encountering God “totally by yourself.” As we will see, prayer requires a community in order for the full aesthetic power of the liturgy to forge this connection to God. Kaunfer holds that this experience takes place most centrally during the Amidah, when the worshiper is “supposed to be looking into the face of God.” At the same time, however, he claims that this is a uniquely difficult experience to achieve, requiring intense concentration and focus. Therefore, the whole aesthetic environment of worship must be in service to helping the individual attain this experience—and that includes the behavior of other worshipers in this environment. Hence, in addition to a traditional liturgy,

11. Kaunfer, Empowered Judaism, 111.
14. “Amidah has the highest bar of kavanah [intention].” Ibid., 26:43-26:46.
the worshiper needs the unified support of a whole community actively engaged together in prayer in order to experience this connection. This is because, for Kaunfer, everything that occurs during a worship service has an effect on the aesthetics of the prayer environment. In his words, “your body, your eyes, bending your knees, standing and sitting … the space in which you are situated, what you are looking at, the chair in which you are seated, the book and the feel of the cover”—all of these factors shape the prayer experience for those present.\(^{15}\)

To illustrate the importance of this communal involvement and examine, more generally, how the liturgy forms a connection to God for Kaunfer, think back to the two prayers that we explored in the previous chapter: the *Shema* and the *Amidah*. Kaunfer claims that the transition from the former to the latter is traditionally structured in a manner intended to have a significant emotional impact on the worshiper. Although the central proclamation of the *Shema* is traditionally recited out loud by the entire congregation in unison, the blessings that follow are, like much of the liturgy, traditionally read in a quieter tone by each individual at her own pace, producing a low, cacophonous mumbling. Kaunfer claims that the mumbling at this stage serves a dual purpose:

First, the cacophony of a low mumbling davening\(^{16}\) [praying] moves the worshiper from a purely cognitive experience to a deep, emotional act. Second, it provides a contrast to the silence of the *Amidah*, which is all the more powerful when it replaces the sounds that precede it. … The silence of an *Amidah* that begins (with no interrupting page announcement or stage direction) right after the mumbling of the worshipers is a contrasting silence—a silence that makes us straighten up and pay attention to the new mode of prayer before us.\(^{17}\)

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16. Kaunfer uses the term “davening” to refer to a mode of praying that is considered more active and participatory. It is one used in certain traditional contexts, especially in communities deriving from Europe, and connotes, for Kaunfer, a certain level of comfort with all aspects of the liturgical performance.
Kaunfer refers here to the fact, discussed in the introduction to this thesis, that the Amidah is traditionally chanted silently. The emotional impact of this transition from the sound of the Shema to the silence of the Amidah is felt only when a sufficient number of people are reading the blessings out loud and producing this low cacophonous mumbling together. We have here an example, then, of how prayer requires a community actively praying together in order for the full aesthetic power of the liturgy to be felt.

But there is more going on in this moment for Kaunfer. He claims that “there is something very powerful in that shift” from the Shema to the Amidah, something that provides “an aesthetic experience that is larger than the sum of its parts.”\(^1\) This is the critical moment that initiates the Amidah, during which the worshiper is “supposed to be looking into the face of God,” and experiencing him directly.\(^2\) He claims that “when you have the Shema [recited] out loud and the Amidah [spoken] quietly and you put them together, you [are] actually moving some emotional distance from what it means to be loud [to] what it means to be quiet.”\(^3\) Kaunfer posits that if “the Shema and the Amidah are legislated to have different aspects of volume” according to traditional Jewish practice, it must be the case that the volume of these prayers “convey[s] different kinds of emotional information.”\(^4\) Since “the Shema is the moment in which we accept the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven upon ourselves” it is, therefore, “very appropriate to say out loud and in unison.”\(^5\) The Amidah, however, is “an intimate prayer in which one recites the most personal requests that one has towards God.”\(^6\) It is, therefore, “the

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20. Kaunfer, “Body and Soul,” 1:00:10-1:00:20.
22. Ibid., 29:54-30:38.
23. Ibid.
whispered prayer,” since whispering expresses emotional intimacy.²⁴ He explains that “if I am whispering … you are right near me.”²⁵ The loudness of the Shema implies to the individual either that God is far away or that God does not need to come close in order to hear the worshiper. However, he continues, “if I [subsequently] lower my voice, you have to draw near in order to hear me,” and we therefore draw “closer together.”²⁶ When the prayer service then transitions into the silence of the Amidah, God must come closer in order to hear the whispered pleas of each worshiper. Since, as Kaunfer claims, these whispers are supposed to be so silent that even the one praying should not hear herself, God is drawn in as close as possible.²⁷ Hence, “the whole idea of whispering is a way of actually holding God close” so as to have this experience.²⁸

While it is clear Kaunfer understands that this is the moment that the connection to God is formed, he is frustratingly opaque about exactly why this is the case. That is, he does not provide an explanation of the specific mechanics involved in forming the connection. It is clear that this connection comes out of the specific chain of emotions engaged by the liturgy, a chain that somehow culminates in an emotionally laden transition—from sound to silence between the Shema and the Amidah—which allows us to “draw close” to God and form a connection with the divine. He is not clear, however, on how the “drawing close” that occurs forms a connection with God—or, in fact, on precisely what this “connection” entails. Although Kaunfer unfortunately does not provide enough information for us to fully flesh out this dynamic, I will hazard a suggestion as to what he might think is happening.

²⁴. Ibid.
²⁸. Ibid., 53:31-53:35.
One way to interpret the available material is to take him literally. In this case, Kaunfer would be claiming that God is actually drawing close to the individual in order to hear her better. Another way would be to flip the perspective so that we take Kaunfer to be describing not the actions of God but rather the subjective experience of the worshiper. The idea here would be that the experience of speaking loudly, but then suddenly switching to a lower volume, registers subconsciously as an experience of moving closer to the person to whom I am addressing. This would seem to cohere with his emphasis on the way aesthetics affect our inner emotional experience. But this psychological—or, perhaps, phenomenological—explanation is undermined by the fact that Kaunfer continually emphasizes that the connection to God is real. One possible way to reconcile these interpretations would be to suggest that, from Kaunfer’s perspective, insofar as the sounds of the liturgy are supposed to “unlock … emotional space that is” normally “cordoned off” from our everyday experiences, and insofar as this is a presence “that is so often hidden,” perhaps the specific sounds of the liturgy are able to unlock some sort of unique emotional awareness that God is always close by. Perhaps the experience of a climactic silence at this liturgical moment allows the participant to withdraw from the communal experience of the Shema when the sounds of the other worshipers could be heard all around her to an emotional space where she is suddenly left totally on her own, with no other sound to distract her from dwelling in this personal awareness of God’s presence.29

This is just one possible explanation of what Kaunfer has in mind. Ultimately, as I said, he simply does not explain the dynamics of precisely how prayer grounds a connection to God. The important point for us now is that prayer is able, somehow, to form a connection to God, a connection that can only come from the specific aesthetic experiences provided by a properly

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performed traditional liturgy. It is for this reason that, on Kaunfer’s view, it is so important for
the Empowered Jew to be “engaged in traditional language and practice” in the sense of
possessing the ability to recite the full liturgy, including prayer, in its original languages
(primarily Hebrew), as well as the ability to perform whatever accompanying actions that may be
required. With these skills, Empowered Jews can create liturgical experiences for themselves and
others in which God’s presence can be experienced.

**Empowered Practice: Skilled and Unmediated Lay-Focused Performances**

This emphasis on encountering God also illuminates the second dimension of the
Empowered Jew being “engaged in traditional language and practice”: the idea that Empowered
Jews seek to engage in these practices themselves and without any sort of mediation provided by
a rabbi or other religious professional. This brings us back to the communal aspect outlined
earlier. For Kaunfer, the proper performance of the liturgy requires active participation by a
number of people fulfilling certain key roles. For example, Kaunfer claims, in any worship
service there should be a prayer leader who sets the pacing, selects the melodies, and encourages
others to participate. Similarly, as I indicated in my introduction, there are certain days when the
liturgy calls for a service in which the *Sefer Torah* (the handwritten scroll containing the first
five books of the Hebrew Bible) is recited alongside a number of special prayers, blessings, and
rituals. On such occasions, Kaunfer continues, the proper performance of the liturgy requires the
presence of individuals who can read the Hebrew text of the *Sefer Torah*, call up congregants to
recite blessings prior to the recitation of different sections of the text, and, after the reading, hoist
up the rather heavy scroll and turn around so the congregation can see the words written on it. If
Empowered Jews are to know how to perform the liturgy, then they must possess “a range of
practical skills,” such as knowledge of “how to lead services, how to read Torah, … how to lift
the Torah,” and how to fulfill other roles that are required for the proper performance of the liturgy.30 Empowered Jews, in other words, are individuals who need not rely on others—for example, on professional clergy—to create communal prayer experiences in which individuals are able to encounter God. Rather, they have the skills to perform the full liturgy for themselves—without relying on communal professionals—as well as the ability to lead prayer and participate in any role during the worship service.31 Empowered Jews thus create communities of shared values through which they can “legitimately forge a deep connection to God through traditional prayer.”32 In sum, this experience of God in prayer is so vital that, rather than ceding the responsibility of praying to other individuals (such as professional clergy) and becoming silent, passive spectators, Empowered Jews take responsibility for performing it themselves, becoming active participants who can engage directly with this crucial pillar of Jewish tradition.

**OPENNESS TO THE WIDER WORLD**

This leaves us with the next element of Kaunfer’s picture: the idea of openness to the wider world. To be “open to the wider world” means that Empowered Jews not only refuse to passively rely on religious professionals, but also embrace the idea that acquiring and deploying the skills outlined above is fully compatible with pursuing careers outside the Jewish communal world.33 To prove his point, Kaunfer directs his readers to the fact that independent minyanim “by and large, are not run by (future) Jewish professionals or rabbinical students. … The

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31. Ibid., 11.
32. Ibid., 10.
33. Ibid., 74.
independent minyanim offer a place for an educated laity … to run a prayer community.”  

In possessing the skills to lead prayer services, not only do Empowered Jews not need to rely on religious professionals during the worship experience, but they are also equipped to establish new minyanim wherever they go. Empowered Jews thus “take responsibility for creating Jewish community,” either by revitalizing older institutions or by creating new communities outside of the existing denominations. Due to the increasing mobility of contemporary life, these Jews can spread new prayer communities wherever work or school takes them. As I will discuss later, this mobility is critical for the realization of a vision Kaunfer describes as “a world of Empowered Judaism, where every Jew has the potential to take hold of the gift of Jewish heritage.” The fact that Empowered Jews are lay members of their communities and do not make up a small elite of Jewish professionals is key for this vision, because Kaunfer claims that “Judaism cannot survive without real engagement by masses of Jews in the substance of the tradition itself.” In Part Two, I will discuss the threats to Jewish survival that only these “masses” of Empowered Jews can thwart.

Kaunfer’s argument, however, goes even further. He suggests that these Jews—habituated to an active mode of worship and possessing the skills to lead prayer services and participate in any role that is necessary—are also committed to “building communities and institutions that offer direct engagement with Jewish life”—that provide opportunities to further deepen the skills and habits that have already been acquired and while inculcating them in others, as well. Kaunfer claims that “80 percent of minyanim” founded by these Empowered Jews

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 3.
36. Ibid., 161.
37. Ibid., 159.
38. Ibid., 156.
“offer classes or other [such] opportunities to learn to daven [pray actively]/leyn [read from the Torah].”39 In other words, the Empowered Jew is committed to building communities where she can further deepen the abilities she has begun to acquire, and where others can become empowered as well.

By this point, it should be clear that Kaunfer outlines a vision of Empowered Jews who possess the skills that allow them to take an active role in engaging directly with experiences like prayer without the need for religious specialists to mediate these encounters. Such Jews, moreover, turn out to be committed to participating in, and even forming, the sorts of communities that provide forms of training that can deepen those skills and impart them to others. What Kaunfer seems to provide, in other words, is similar to what we saw Soloveitchik outline. Although he does not use this language, Kaunfer provides us with what I described in my introduction as a vision of an ideal subject: an individual who has come to possess a specific set of skills, habits, and commitments. This ideal subject—this “Empowered Jew”—is someone who is habituated to being actively engaged in prayer, and who has come to acquire, and is committed to further developing, the skills necessary for this active engagement by participating in and building Jewish communities where others can become empowered as well. Although Kaunfer does not use these terms frequently, I would suggest that the main characteristic of Empowered Jews is that they are active rather than passive. That is to say, these Jews do not passively let others provide them with core experiences such as prayer. They do not experience prayer by quietly listening to someone else perform the liturgy, but rather actively seek out and create these experiences for themselves.

39. Ibid., 64.
It seems, in other words, that the active approach to Judaism taken by these Empowered Jews is defined in opposition to a passive approach to Judaism. As I argue in the next section, it is the pervasiveness of this type of passive approach in the contemporary world that, for Kaunfer, makes the need for Empowered Jews so acute. On his view, a passive approach to Judaism is at the heart of a crisis threatening Jewish life in America—a crisis that can only be resolved by creating this new type of subject.

**PART TWO – THE AESTHETICS OF PASSIVITY AND THE CRISIS OF ENGAGEMENT**

Throughout *Empowered Judaism*, Kaunfer presents a strong critique of Jewish life in America. Though his critique touches on a number of different sectors of the Jewish community, his primary accusation is that American Jewish institutions have either unwittingly contributed to, or failed to prevent, a crisis that has resulted in large numbers of Jews dropping out of Jewish religious life entirely:

American Judaism is in crisis. But it isn’t the crisis that mainstream American Jewish leaders would have you believe. It is at once much better and much worse. The false crisis—declining Jewish continuity, caused by assimilation and an intermarriage rate of 52 percent—has become the rallying cry of institutional Judaism. But fundamentally, it is a red herring. The real crisis is one of meaning and engagement. For the first time in centuries, two Jews can marry each other and have Jewish children without any connection to Jewish heritage, wisdom, or tradition. Part of the problem is that there are very few places that offer Jews an opportunity to experience the power and mystery of the Jewish tradition firsthand. Even people who are intermarried by and large have little connection to Torah, Jewish practice, and values. They are dependent on others to translate Judaism for them, and they trudge to High Holiday services to receive the requisite ‘be good!’ sermons, only to return to their lives unchallenged and unchanged. They have been sold a world in which Judaism is a bunch of platitudes, at best matching their existing modern liberal values (but adding nothing beyond what they already know), and at worst completely irrelevant to the struggle they experience day to day. Who can blame these Jews for disengaging with Judaism? This is the legacy of American Judaism in the twenty-first century—a Judaism that has been undersold and watered down.40

40. Ibid., 157.
The problem here seems to involve a passive Jewish life that is so uncompelling as to undermine communal involvement—a situation in which many Jews are “dependent on others to translate Judaism for them,” and which leads to many individuals abandoning “any connection to Jewish heritage, wisdom, or tradition.”

In this section I will suggest that it is this crisis that stands behind Kaunfer’s vision of the ideal subject. Kaunfer, I will argue, holds that Empowered Jews are vital because he sees American Judaism as spreading a culture of passivity, a passivity that has led to this crisis of “meaning and engagement” resulting in large numbers of Jews dropping out of Jewish life entirely. According to Kaunfer, “among American Jews, there is significant demand for meaningful, engaged Jewish life.” Yet despite this widespread desire to become actively engaged in the substance of Judaism, Jews are not finding “that engagement in existing institutions.” According to Kaunfer, the reason for this is that the synagogue aesthetics and heavily edited liturgies of most liberal American Jewish denominations—that is, non-Orthodox denominations that embrace egalitarianism, such as the Reform and Conservative movements—have promoted a culture of passivity and undermined the power of the liturgy to connect worshipers to God. Lacking that emotional connection through prayer, Jews are no longer motivated to remain involved in Jewish communal life and therefore end up disengaging entirely from Judaism. American Judaism faces, therefore, a crisis of “meaning” in the sense that Jews no longer experience this powerful connection to God through prayer, and a crisis of “engagement”

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 155.
43. Ibid.
44. Though Kaunfer also takes issue with Orthodox Judaism, the audience he seems to be addressing are primarily members of these “liberal” denominations, hence his critique is leveled more often at them. As we will see, his critique with Orthodoxy is primarily due to their gender exclusivity. Aesthetically, he is much more comfortable with Orthodox worship, but value-wise, he is more comfortable with the liberal denominations.
in the sense that, lacking this meaningful connection to their religion, Jews are no longer motivated to remain actively involved in Jewish life. In essence, we will see that Kaunfer claims these worship services have become so unattractive that Jews see little reason to remain involved with the Jewish community.

SYNAGOGUE AESTHETICS: BASHFULNESS AND ANTI-COMMUNITY

One of the key factors Kaunfer sees as leading to this “crisis of meaning and engagement” is what he considers to be deeply problematic aesthetic choices that have encouraged passivity and undercut the possibility for the liturgy to form a connection to God. Throughout his writings and lectures, Kaunfer articulates an aesthetic critique of synagogue worship. Though he admits that what counts as a “good” aesthetic decision is contestable, Kaunfer claims that “we may actually agree … on what everybody can say is a negative aesthetic.” To evaluate aesthetic choices, Kaunfer poses the following questions: What purpose do the aesthetics serve? Do they serve to heighten the prayer experience for the worshiper so they can access God, or do they cut against this goal? As we will see, for Kaunfer, the aesthetics of synagogue worship in typical liberal American synagogues serve to discourage active participation and therefore habituate Jews into a passive mode of religiosity.

Kaunfer describes the traditional, premodern physical arrangement of a synagogue as one in which “all rows face forward, with the prayer leader stationed in the center, also facing forward.” However, this arrangement was altered in the “classic layout of the liberal American synagogue,” which places, at the front of the room, an elevated section where “the clergy face

46. Summarized from ibid.
47. Kaunfer, Empowered Judaism, 114.
the congregation” and where all the praying and the “Torah reading take place.” The problem with this arrangement, Kaunfer argues, is that it discourages communal involvement. “When people face the congregation,” he claims, “all the issues of stage fright and performance anxiety become heightened,” leading to “a shaky voice, nervous laughter, and general discomfort.”\(^{49}\) In other words, orienting the space so that anyone who wants to play a role such as leading prayer or reading from the *Sefer Torah* has to face the entire congregation ends up discouraging most people from performing the roles and duties of the worship service. These duties are, for the most part, ceded to the professional clergy who are more comfortable being in the spotlight.

Thus, rather than being constituted as an experience in which all individuals are able to participate fully, worship becomes an event in which a professional clergy person—most likely a cantor, a member of the clergy trained in Jewish liturgical music and charged with leading the prayer service—performs the liturgy in a polished, professional, and (given the musical styles encouraged at many American seminaries) often operatic style, with congregants only chiming in occasionally. While this cantor may have the best intentions, and while people may enjoy the aesthetic beauty of her singing, this type of “overly performative” style—“so far removed from the real sounds of the voices in the community”—is difficult for most people to follow and discourages “others from joining in” to participate in the prayer experience.\(^{50}\) Unable to follow along, most people become passive spectators, silently listening as a professional prays on their behalf. This dynamic “reinforces the feeling that this prayer service is a performance to be watched, with the actors onstage at the front and the audience dutifully listening in the rows below.”\(^{51}\) Worshipers become habituated to sitting silently and passively, thinking that the

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 113-114.  
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 115.  
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 115-116.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 114.
obligation to perform prayer rests with others and that any active participation on their part would be a distraction from the main performance, becoming immediately noticed by the silent congregation and the clergy facing them from the front. Furthermore, since (as we have seen) the prayer experience is meant to be emotional, the worshiper requires a certain amount of vulnerability and openness in order to actively engage in prayer. However, this “openness to vulnerability is a very difficult atmosphere to engender, and sensing that people are watching you can cause you to become self-conscious and retreat from the possibility of true openness in prayer.”

In sum, the layout of the synagogue and the musicality of the clergy’s performance together create an aesthetic experience that discourages people from actively participating in worship. Thus, Kaunfer claims that “the modern synagogue is often plagued by an overlay of silence,” a silence that arises out of a “religious bashfulness,” a fear of publicly and actively praying or participating in the worship service. This bashfulness is a manifestation of the passivity these services engender in worshipers.

Given Kaunfer’s understanding of the traditional liturgy we explored in Part One, it should be clear why he sees these aesthetic decisions discouraging participation as so problematic. For the liturgy to allow the worshiper to approach God, she must be open to the possibility that prayer can be a deeply emotional experience. However, the widespread religious bashfulness means that people are unwilling to be emotionally vulnerable enough to allow the liturgy to engage their emotions so as to facilitate this encounter. Furthermore, as we also saw earlier, the crucial moment of the liturgy—when the transition from the sound of the Shema to the silence of Amidah facilitates the emotional connection—can occur only if everyone is

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52. Ibid., 48.
actively praying together out loud during the *Shema*, so that when they suddenly together transition to the silent *Amidah*, they experience this drawing close to God. However, this passivity means that “in many prayer settings,” silence is “the default mode of prayer.” Therefore, without a preceding noisiness, the transition to the silence of the *Amidah* loses its emotional impact and the worshiper is unable to form a connection to God.\(^{55}\)

**TRUNCATED LITURGIES: CYNICISM AND THE EMOTIONAL DISCONNECT**

Another factor Kaunfer cites as contributing to this passivity and emotional disconnect is the decision of many liberal American denominations to use highly-edited versions of the liturgy. Though the liturgy has always had a degree of fluidity since its inception, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing today, the traditional text of the liturgy has undergone numerous major revisions by various groups.\(^{56}\) Kaunfer maintains that these changes have dramatically altered the sound of the prayer service and severely undercut its ability to engage the specific emotions necessary to facilitate the experience of God. This aspect of Kaunfer’s thought gives rise to the following question: If he admits that the liturgy has always undergone numerous revisions throughout its history, why does he reject these nineteenth- and twentieth-century revisions while accepting earlier changes as part of the “traditional” liturgy? The distinction, it appears, comes from his account of the goals that these revisions were designed to achieve. Kaunfer seems to think that premodern changes to the liturgy were made with the goal of enhancing the experience of connecting to God, while modern revisions are guided by an idea that he takes to be profoundly misguided: the idea that the words of the liturgy are supposed to

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convey to the worshiper some theological truth. That is, he claims that modern revisions are made with the explicit goal of bringing the liturgy in line with the intellectual, theological, and cultural trends of the present.57

According to Kaunfer, if prayer is a way to proclaim shared beliefs or values, if prayer is meant to be a rational and intellectual experience, then any line of the liturgy that is theologically problematic or appears to be irrational or extraneous, must either be removed, rewritten, or reinterpreted.58 For example, some traditional forms of Judaism maintain that at some point in the future, God will once again dwell in a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem where the ancient order of animal sacrifices that are detailed in the Torah will be reinstated.59 The traditional text of the liturgy is, therefore, full of passages asking this of God: for example, one of the petitions in the Amidah asks God to “restore the service to Your Sanctuary, and accept with love and favor Israel’s fire-offerings.”60 In the nineteenth-century, the Reform movement rejected this belief, in part, on the grounds that animal sacrifices were a form of worship that reflected the historical context in which the Bible was written and were, therefore, no longer relevant to Jews living in the modern era.61 Consequently, this petition, along with similar passages, was removed from

57. I am interested here less in whether Kaunfer’s claim is correct, and more in attempting to clarify the content of his reasoning. A full assessment of the factors motivating modern liturgical changes would be better suited to a historian of Jewish prayer..
59. Elbogen, Jewish Liturgy, 332.
60. Mangel, Siddur Tehillat HaShem, 50.
61. Elbogen, Jewish Liturgy, 332. Another important—indeed, perhaps even more important—reason for rejecting these messianic aspirations was that the early Reform movement wanted to make Judaism an identity that would not conflict with being a citizen of a modern European state. In this view, by embracing a belief that Jews would one day return to Jerusalem, Jews opened themselves up to accusations of divided loyalty from their fellow citizens. Thus, the Reform movement rejected this belief, claiming that Jewish loyalty is first and foremost owed to the nation-state in which they are citizens.
Reform prayerbooks. Similarly, as we saw in the previous chapter, the opening of the Amidah traditionally invokes individuals seen as key male ancestors of the Jewish people: the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, many synagogues within the Conservative and Reform movements—denominations that have explicitly embraced feminist values such as gender egalitarianism—have come to see this as an implicit endorsement of the idea that men are more important than women, and therefore rewrite this text to also include the names of the biblical matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. Since the traditional liturgy is full of such problematic phrases, Kaunfer points out, most liberal American denominations have cut out and rewritten much of it in order to reflect their own system of beliefs. Indeed, he continues, the idea that prayer is meant to be understandable and accurately teach key truths has led not only to revisions in the text of the liturgy, but also to revisions in the manner in which the liturgy is recited. Fearing that most worshipers will not be able to understand the traditional Hebrew text used in the liturgy, many congregations now conduct prayer services in English in order to ensure intelligibility.

There are numerous problems with these changes for Kaunfer. The first issue is that these changes leave the worshiper unchallenged. Kaunfer highlights this problem in the following passage on the value of a direct engagement with the text of the Hebrew Bible:

A surface-level connection to Torah is fully affirming (‘Look how nicely Torah correlates with my Western values of justice!’). But a real engagement with Torah is much more complex. It involves confronting the difficult and alienating passages rather than writing them off as artifacts of a culture long gone. … In a world with no clear answers, what better way to reflect on the assumptions by which we live our lives than to encounter the sometimes foreign and unfamiliar values inherent in our tradition and let ourselves be surprised, shocked, and challenged by them? If a reflective life is meant to be more than

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62. Reif, Judaism and Hebrew Prayer, 274-5; Elbogen, Jewish Liturgy, 326-332.
63. In fact, it is striking that Kaunfer accepts a version of this change only as a way of preventing conflicts within minyanim: Kaunfer, Empowered Judaism, 30-31.
65. Kaunfer, Empowered Judaism, 122-123.
just affirming our existing beliefs, then Torah provides the opportunity to engage with life more fully.\(^{66}\)

Though he is not discussing prayer in this passage, elsewhere he makes the same point about prayer, claiming that “changing [a] word” whenever it might be objectionable “won’t ultimately work, we need to confront that word.”\(^{67}\) According to Kaunfer, if the liturgy merely affirms the preexisting beliefs of the individual, she loses the opportunity to grow and be intellectually transformed. She leaves the prayer experience no different, intellectually, than when she entered. In other words, encountering a problematic passage in the liturgy forces the worshiper to both question and clarify her own assumptions, beliefs, and values. Furthermore, the actual meaning of a liturgical passage is not always apparent. Kaunfer claims that “there is something hidden in the liturgy, there is something mysterious, there is something to be revealed in the liturgy, such that if you think you understand it at first blush,” and judge it based on its surface level meaning, you will miss the deeper meaning it is meant to express that could be uncovered with deeper study.\(^{68}\) By removing anything objectionable, liberal denominations do not give worshipers the opportunity to be challenged, to clarify their own beliefs, and to engage with the text. In short, by doing all the interpretive work beforehand and only presenting worshipers with the product of their studies, these denominations habituate worshipers to passively accepting the interpretations of others, rather than encouraging these individuals to create their own.

Yet the most significant problem Kaunfer sees with these liturgical changes is that they have been enacted without a recognition that “prayer is not meant to be seen as a flat statement of belief. It is a literary creation with all the power, nuance, and complexity of literary

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 153.
creations.” In the actual performance of the liturgy, the specific details of the theology implied by the text are, ultimately, less important than the aesthetic effect that they create through sound, as well as the emotions that are conveyed through their performance. According to Kaunfer, “our experience of prayer is in large part determined by our use of the words in a non-rational context.” The words are primarily “meant to move” the worshiper by creating “a certain sound atmosphere.” Indeed, the meaning of the words is primarily important not as an articulation of ideas, but rather as another factor that contributes to the overall aesthetic experience:

The prayer book is not simply a string of sounds in a foreign language, but a collection of phrases, images, and allusions that can be extremely important. If every word is said with equal time, speed, and emphasis, then there is no topography to the prayer service. If certain phrases are recited with a bit more volume, or slower, or with force, then the words of the siddur [prayer book] start to strike emotional chords. We don’t speak in a monotone; similarly, prayer must be said with expression.

The meaning of the text is, therefore, primarily useful for determining the details of its performance, such as volume, emphasis, pacing, and especially the melody, all of which engage the emotions in specific ways.

The way in which the meaning of the text effects the melody is especially important. Take the passage about restoring animal sacrifices that was eliminated by the Reform movement. Though the meaning may seem objectionable, the fact that it conveys a yearning for the future may guide the prayer leader to select a melody that also conveys a sense of longing. If such a melody accompanies the specific sounds of this phrase in Hebrew, and if its recitation is performed with an understanding of the basic meaning of the words, the sound of this performance may start striking specific “emotional chords.” Ultimately, for Kaunfer, though the

meaning is still important, it is the aesthetic aspect of the performance that will have a much more significant impact on facilitating the worshipers emotional encounter with God.

In eliminating, rewriting, or reordering prayers to reflect a particular system of beliefs without consideration for the aesthetic contributions these prayers make to the emotional dimension of worship, liberal denominations have dramatically altered the sound experience of the prayer service. Consequently, the sounds of the liturgy can no longer elicit the necessary chain of emotions that will connect the worshiper to God. In short, for Kaunfer, these theologically motivated changes to the liturgy not only leave worshipers passively accepting an unchallenging prayer service, they have left Jews emotionally disconnected from worship.

However, he claims that most people are “not willing to admit that the emotions are not actually being activated on in the service” and instead “blame that on the words.”73 That is, for Kaunfer, “people often hide [their] emotional disconnect, in the intellectual disconnect,” and focus on the words themselves as an excuse not to engage in worship.74 This, for Kaunfer, is cynicism, which he claims is “the ultimate roadblock” preventing an engagement with prayer.75 This situation is made even worse when the prayer services are conducted in English. For Kaunfer, “English readings usually fall flat because the aesthetic experience of saying those readings is lacking on a noncognitive, performative level. We may understand everything in the English prayer, but the mystery and power of the Hebrew text is completely absent.”76 To be sure, this may seem to contradict Kaunfer’s emphasis on empowering Jews with the ability to read and understand Hebrew, since that would allow worshipers to understand what is being said during prayer. The nature of his reasoning becomes clearer, however, when we remember that he

74. Ibid., 1:11:50-1:12:04.
76. Kaunfer, Empowered Judaism, 122-123.
is primarily addressing an American audience. In an American context, the meaning of the Hebrew text, especially when it is recited during a prayer service, is not immediately apparent for non-native Hebrew speakers. For Kaunfer, the value of praying in Hebrew is that it obscures an immediate awareness of what is being said so that the worshiper “can experience the mystery and complexity of the prayer sounds themselves.”77 Additionally, Kaunfer suggests that if an individual does in fact understand Hebrew well, she can better appreciate the fact that these liturgical texts are written as “poetry, in which allusions abound, and the surface rendering is never enough.”78 English recitations, by contrast, immediately draw attention to the plain meaning of the words being uttered, providing an easy target for cynics looking for an intellectual scapegoat for their emotional disconnect. In a word, reciting prayer in a way that is immediately understandable intellectualizes the experience, further eliminating any emotional power the liturgy might possess. With such an “undersold and watered” worship experience, “who can blame these Jews for disengaging with Judaism?”79

I will now explore how, for Kaunfer, these poor aesthetic decisions ultimately lead to Jews dropping out of Jewish communal involvement entirely. Imagine an individual growing up with the sort of prayer service described above—for example, with seating arrangements and musical styles that discourage active participation and a heavily edited English liturgy. Having never really engaged directly in prayer herself, always listening silently to the cantor’s performance, and too bashful to express her emotions in a setting where she feels like she would be visible to everyone, this individual has never really felt an emotional connection to worship. Even if she was able to open up, the English rendering of the liturgy lacks the affective power to

77. Ibid., 123.
79. Ibid., 157.
engage her emotions anyways. She has, therefore, become a passive spectator, her mind left to reflect on whatever she is experiencing with a level of detachment. Indeed, with the liturgy nicely summarizing the theology she has grown up with, she lacks an intellectual challenge to occupy her as she sits in synagogue. This might be reason enough for her to stop attending services. However, if she was raised with a strong Jewish identity, she may be unwilling to admit that Judaism as a religion is not emotionally engaging. Yet feeling bored and frustrated by this uninteresting and unengaging prayer service and with her mind free to wander, she begins to look for something to blame for this detachment; subconsciously, she begins to search for a justifiable reason to not come back. Even though the synagogue uses a liturgy that has been edited to reflect a consistent theology, the immediate understanding of English words make it easy for her to find some innocuous detail to get caught on. She may raise this problematic word or phrase with other congregants, which might lead to even further revisions of the liturgy. Yet no matter how many times this happens, no liturgy will ever fully please everyone, and the fault ultimately does not lie with the words. More likely, she will say to herself “I just can’t go to a synagogue where they include this objectionable phrase in their liturgy,” and find that a suitable enough excuse to stop attending synagogue.

However, even though she might have stopped attending services at that synagogue, she may still yearn for some sort of meaningful engagement with Judaism. Despite this widespread passivity, Kaunfer maintains that all Jews, “are in search of meaning and engagement,” and “want the skills to own their Jewish lives,” they just lack the opportunities to gain these skills.80 She may go to an event organized by a synagogue or community center meant to draw Jews back into community life, but these events rely on more superficial aspects of Jewish identity to draw

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people in, assuming that young Jews are “are only interested in surface-level engagement with Jewish culture: jokes, bagels, singles events,” and that “anything challenging, deep, or smacking of religion might scare people away.” She may try an Orthodox synagogue, but she is alienated by the fact that “men were offered the opportunity to lead,” while she and all other women are excluded from this honor. Going to another synagogue affiliated with a liberal denomination, she finds the same issues as before. Without experiencing this powerful and meaningful connection to God at any of these prayer services, what reason does she have to stay involved in those communities? She may continue to “trudge to High Holiday services” once a year out of a sense of obligation, and when she has children she may join a synagogue to take advantage of the excellent educational programs many of them offer. But since Judaism itself is not what is motivating this involvement, she may easily find better childcare programs elsewhere. This example highlights some of the key ways that, according to Kaunfer, worship in a typical liberal Jewish synagogue has led to this widespread passivity threatening Jewish life in America.

With this critique in mind, the need Kaunfer sees for these active, community-oriented Empowered Jews becomes clear. He claims that the only way to end this passivity crisis and “make a true sea change in American Jewish life,” is to “foster an entire generation of Empowered Jews.” Since, as we examined in Part One, these Empowered Jews are committed to building or participating in communities that provide vibrant prayer experiences which encourage active participation and allow worshipers to “legitimately forge a deep connection to God through traditional prayer,” these Empowered Jews can reverse this passivity crisis by

81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., 67.
83. Ibid., 157.
84. Ibid., 129.
encouraging participation and restoring this emotional connection to God.\(^{85}\) The ideal subjects Kaunfer envisions—subjects habituated to being actively engaged in worship and in possession of the skills and commitments that allow them to build communities where others can learn how to become active as well—are precisely the sort of individuals that are desperately needed to combat the religious passivity he sees as undermining the ability for worship to meaningfully engage worshipers.

**PART THREE – HOW PRAYER FORMS EMPOWERED JEWS**

Kaunfer claims that the only way to empower Jews is through education.\(^{86}\) However, this education is not simply the acquisition of “skills and knowledge,” but also requires “experience in a community that grapples with deep issues of meaning and holds certain values dear.”\(^{87}\) It is in the context of generating this type of communal experience that prayer plays a central role in creating Empowered Jews. In this section, I will show how this occurs—how, for Kaunfer, prayer forms his ideal subject, the Empowered Jew. As I will argue, for Kaunfer, the proper performance of the prayer service generates a connection to God, which in turn motivates worshipers to actively participate in and build communities where they acquire the skills that constitute empowerment. On this model, prayer does not, on its own, fully form the ideal subject. Rather, prayer constitutes a crucial first step in the process of subject formation, instilling in individuals the motivation to participate in the type of communal setting where they can then be formed into this Empowered Jew.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 129.
\(^{87}\) Ibid.
Though Kaunfer takes prayer to be a “mystery,” he claims that “improving prayer is not mysterious.” He therefore proposes the following vision of a new type of prayer service designed to overcome the barriers to prayer I mentioned earlier in order to generate a connection to God and, as we will see, motivate communal involvement: “What [is] this vision? On paper it [is] simple: a fully traditional liturgy and Torah reading; a commitment to full gender egalitarianism; a short (five-minute) dvar Torah [sermon following the Torah reading]; a lay-led ethos with high standards of excellence; a service that doesn’t drag and engages the daveners through music.” In the rest of this chapter I will flesh out this vision, examining how Kaunfer understands these changes to allow prayer to motivate the communal participation that will form Empowered Jews.

**Traditional and Egalitarian**

An empowering prayer service must use “a fully traditional liturgy,” because, as we saw, only the full, unedited, and untranslated traditional liturgy has the power to engage our emotions in the manner that will form a connection to God. Furthermore, the service must also be committed “to full gender egalitarianism” in the sense that women are not only permitted but also encouraged to participate in any role in worship. According to Kaunfer, there has always been a “de facto union in American Judaism between full women’s participation and a scaled down service.” He is here referring to the fact that, as noted earlier, fully traditional liturgies have not always been available outside of an Orthodox context where women are usually

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89. Ibid., 17.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 30.
excluded from taking leadership roles. With the liberal denominations now having been committed to full gender egalitarianism for the past few decades, many American Jews are not willing to “compromise a core part of their identity” by attending an Orthodox service where women are barred from having any major role in worship.\textsuperscript{93} Therefore, the importance of this egalitarianism for Kaunfer lies in the fact that it enables participation by Jews who may otherwise be unwilling to attend a traditional service where they can form a meaningful connection to God. Furthermore, he seems to be suggesting that not only will this commitment to egalitarianism allow non-Orthodox Jews to finally experience the power of traditional prayer, it will allow Orthodox women to have a space where they can finally participate fully, without having to give up part of their identity by attending a service with a truncated liturgy. This dual commitment to tradition and egalitarianism makes it possible for Jews to be in a community that can “legitimately forge a deep connection to God through traditional prayer, without giving up modern values.”\textsuperscript{94}

**Encouraging Participation, Forming Community**

This gets us to the next point: prayer can only work in a community where everyone is participating. This collective participation is needed to create the aesthetic experience necessary for the liturgy to arouse the emotions and access God. Therefore, Kaunfer proposes an approach that removes any divisions between active and passive participants, encourages everyone to participate, and places sound as the central object of focus for the worshipers.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 10.
For Kaunfer, “one of the most critical keys to the success of a davening [prayer] environment” is selecting a room with good acoustics.\(^{95}\) Small, intimate rooms with low ceilings and good acoustics allow for a more powerful and richer sound experience. According to Kaunfer, “there is a value in feeling a bit crowded. By sitting near someone else, I can hear her voice in prayer and don’t have to work too hard to connect my voice to hers.”\(^{96}\) Such a setting elevates the sound of the worship service to the center of attention. Furthermore, sitting close together not only encourages people to join together in song, it has a “cumulative effect” that results in a feeling of “collective purpose and enterprise.”\(^{97}\) In other words, an intimate setting not only allows and encourages people to participate in creating a powerful sound atmosphere, it helps form them into a unified community. Thus, Kaunfer proposes putting out “fewer chairs than necessary in the beginning, so people will be drawn to sitting near others.”\(^{98}\)

The feeling of a unified community and the focus on sound can be further emphasized by other aspects of the arrangement of the prayer space, as well. Kaunfer advocates for the traditional arrangement outlined earlier, whereby “all rows face forward, with the prayer leader stationed in the center, also facing forward.”\(^{99}\) In the following passage he discusses three advantages of such an arrangement:

First, everyone is facing the aron kodesh (the holy ark) rather than facing a leader who is … [praying] toward (at?) the congregation. The unity of purpose is clearly reinforced by the direction of the community. Second, the charismatic role of the prayer leader is diminished—half of the congregation sits in front of the leader, while the other half sits behind her. While at first blush this may seem impersonal, it actually allows both the congregation and the leader to avoid self-consciousness, putting the focus on sound rather than sight. A third advantage is that the prayer leader experiences a different relationship to the congregation by being in their midst. She can better gauge to what extent a melody is ‘working’ and can feel supported by the more active … [worshipers] in the

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 112.
\(^{96}\) Ibid., 113.
\(^{97}\) Ibid.
\(^{98}\) Ibid.
\(^{99}\) Ibid., 114.
congregation. She is simply closer to the entire congregation than in a standard synagogue layout, and she draws strength from that closeness.\textsuperscript{100}

This common orientation helps eliminate the vulnerability and embarrassment that comes from the participants’ feeling that they are constantly being watched by the clergy and their fellow worshipers, removing one of the factors that leads to the bashfulness described earlier. Feeling that no one is looking directly at them, worshipers are free to be active, to let out their emotions, and to take on a larger role in the service itself. Furthermore, without having an individual up front to visually distract you, and being crowded around the prayer leader, the sounds of the liturgy become the central focus of attention. Lastly, forcing people to sit close together around the prayer leader and all face the same direction eliminates the separation between active and passive participants, further reinforcing the communal feeling.

The selection of an effective prayer leader is also essential for encouraging participation. According to Kaunfer, the prayer leader should be “a conductor, helping to set the pace and emotional tone of services and to encourage the congregations active, coordinated participation.”\textsuperscript{101} An effective prayer leader sings in a style that encourages others to join in; if the congregation thinks “I could pray like that person,” they are more likely to participate with the leader.\textsuperscript{102} Thus, the prayer leader should choose melodies that are not “too complicated or too vocally challenging to invite participation.”\textsuperscript{103} Furthermore, a good prayer leader should be able to “select appropriate melodies” that reflect both “an understanding of the words on the page” and an awareness of the “mood of the day.”\textsuperscript{104} The melodies should be carefully chosen and reflect a “coherent arc of mood” that “the prayer leader intends to build” over the course of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 117.
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the services.\textsuperscript{105} Rather than haphazardly selecting melodies based on personal preference or a sense of familiarity, the musical aesthetics of the liturgy must be geared towards building the appropriate affective experience for the prayer service.

According to Kaunfer, however, making these changes does not ensure that there will always be enough people actively participating to fully unleash the power of the liturgy. An influx of bashful worshipers can easily throw off the participatory mood of the room. Although not every single person needs to be an active and engaged worshiper to have “an engaged, participatory congregation,” Kaunfer insists that “there needs to be a critical mass of such people to create the ambience of permission to daven [pray] loudly and not simply rely on the voice of the prayer leader.”\textsuperscript{106} In order to create this critical mass, Kaunfer advocates training congregants who are interested in developing their skills and becoming active worshipers. Since most American Jewish institutions provide no such options, Kaunfer claims that the community itself should offer classes on “a range of practical skills: how to lead services, how to read Torah, … how to lift the Torah, and so on.”\textsuperscript{107} According to Kaunfer, “the confidence and passion of ten engaged members of the congregation [will] spill over into the rest of the people in the room, who will [then] take their cues from these people. When this engaged core starts to sing a melody that the prayer leader began, others know that the melody is not just for the prayer leader, but invites general participation.”\textsuperscript{108} In other words, when enough people in the room are actively participating, it will create a space where newcomers will feel that they too are allowed to actively participate rather than being expected to sit back and passively let the prayer leader or some small group of insiders do most of the work. To illuminate this point, Kaunfer tells a story

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 122.
about his own approach to organizing services on the holiday of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Traditionally, there are several times during this holiday where the worshiper is supposed to perform a full prostration—something not normally done during the rest of the year. Though as we saw in the discussion of the *Amidah*, some bowing is common, full prostration with the forehead to the floor is rarely performed. Due to its rarity, even those people who want to perform this act on Yom Kippur either do not know how to properly do it, or are afraid to be the only ones acting in this manner. To encourage people to participate in the way the traditional liturgy demands, Kaunfer led a class on prostration before the holiday. After teaching congregants about the history and significance of prostration, they practiced this action in a safe space. Consequently, during Yom Kippur these people “provided enough of a critical mass to create a ritual space that made prostration culturally acceptable for the moment, and dozens of others joined them.”

Thus, for Kaunfer, offering training in prayer skills not only produces a critical mass of active worshipers who model how to pray for newcomers, but also ensures the presence of a sufficient number of people participating to create a prayer environment that encourages others to participate. Furthermore, these training programs are meant to “encourage people who wished to develop their skills to become leaders in the future.” Kaunfer insists that prayer groups must “actively seek out new, competent people to lead [prayer] and read Torah,” because by always relying on this “small competent core … you create an insider-outsider dynamic in the minyan.” Giving everyone the opportunity to become a competent prayer leader not only further undermines any sense of division between insiders and outsiders, it makes people realize

109. Ibid., 41.
110. Ibid., 37.
111. Ibid., 36-37.
that they too can be more active in their engagement, motivating them to take classes or actively participate more in prayer.

**REMOVING DISTRACTIONS, FOCUSING ON PRAYER**

Yet even with everyone actively participating in prayer, the connection to God is still very hard to achieve. Kaunfer remarks that even though rabbis have complained about the difficulty of concentrating during prayers such as the *Amidah* for generations, modern technology has made it even harder to sustain extended periods of concentration on any one topic.\(^{112}\) Kaunfer therefore advocates removing, from the prayer environment, any factor that could distract the worshiper and interrupt the emotional flow of the liturgy or try individuals’ patience by dragging out the service for too long. Since he is committed to the performance of the full, non-truncated, traditional liturgy, Kaunfer begins by calling for the *dvar Torah*—a sermon that typically follows the Torah reading—to be limited to five minutes. This ensures that poor speakers do not undermine the affective mood of the congregation by continuing for extended periods of time, while also forcing better speakers to make every minute count, offering the most concise, effective presentation possible.\(^{113}\) Moreover, with the imposition of a strict limit on the sermon, the worshipers can resume the prayer service afterwards without losing any of the emotional momentum.

Kaunfer also emphasizes the need for advance preparation in order to prevent “dead time”—time during which the flow of worship pauses.\(^{114}\) For Kaunfer, “the total time lost in any one of these moments is minimal, but the feeling that no one is paying attention to the flow or the

\(^{113}\) Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism*, 30, 46.
\(^{114}\) Ibid., 123.
time can drag down a service, interfering with participants’ sense of spiritual connection.”¹¹⁵ To demonstrate how this problem can be overcome through preparation, Kaunfer tells a story about how he and other minyan leaders prepared for the holiday of Simchat Torah (“Celebration of the Torah”). On Simchat Torah, the congregation customarily engages in seven rounds of celebratory dancing, each while singing a different song. These songs are not determined by the liturgy; rather, they are traditionally chosen in the moment. However, this energy can begin to lag if after every round, the dancers have to pause to decide which song they should sing next. To avoid losing the emotional momentum of the dancing during these moments, Kaunfer and the other minyan leaders prepared a list of songs in advance. This list did not mean “there was no room for adjustments in the moment, but it meant we didn’t get caught flat-footed without knowing which song would come next, losing the energy we had built up.”¹¹⁶ Such preparation can, therefore, be vital for keeping the worshiper focused on the emotional experience of the liturgy.

Kaunfer also proposes eliminating the common practice whereby prayer leaders or other synagogue officials call out the page number in the prayer book so that no participant falls behind or is confused about which part of the liturgy is being recited. According to Kaunfer, not only do such announcements interrupt the concentration of worshipers reading at their own pace, but they also can “implicitly criticize anyone who is not on the accepted page,” alienating worshipers from the prayer experience.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, not announcing the page numbers forces the worshipers to locate themselves in the liturgy on their own, rather than making them “always” dependent “on an announcement to know where the leader is.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵. Ibid., 124.
¹¹⁶. Ibid., 25.
¹¹⁷. Ibid., 126.
¹¹⁸. Ibid.
themselves without depending on others, worshipers are encouraged to take a more active role in prayer, rather than passively relying on someone else to do this for them.

An effective prayer leader can also play a key role in preventing distractions through her competency with the words of the liturgy. According to Kaunfer, if “her competence is called into question by mistakes or mispronounced words, the congregation becomes distracted from the very hard task of trying to lose themselves in” prayer.¹¹⁹ In other words, frequent errors can jar the worshiper out of the emotional space she needs to inhabit for prayer to have its effect.

In sum, the changes Kaunfer proposes to encourage participation, form community, emphasize the sound of the liturgy, prevent distractions, orient the focus of the worship service exclusively towards prayer, and remove distractions that might interrupt the aesthetic flow of the liturgy, all serve to help the worshiper “search out a meaningful relationship to God through prayer.”¹²⁰ In this way, as with Soloveitchik, we can discern echoes of broader work in religious studies on ritual. In particular, Kaunfer’s account of the communal nature of prayer and its emotional effects exhibits affinities with Émile Durkheim’s claim that collective actions are able to arouse powerful sentiments unavailable when acting alone. For Durkheim, these intense “effervescent” feelings not only forge communal bonds between individuals, but becomes attached to symbols representing the community—such as a god or a totem animal—allowing one to identify with this collective representation.¹²¹

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¹¹⁹. Ibid., 116.
¹²⁰. Ibid., 10.
**Motivating Empowerment and Reinvigorating Jewish Life**

According to Kaunfer, establishing a connection to God in prayer is important because this connection can motivate involvement in communities where participants gain the skills, habits, and commitments that form them into Empowered Jews. To examine how such connections generate communal involvement, I will begin by letting Kaunfer describe the experience he had the first time his minyan met for prayer:

I remember that very first service, when Mara led Shacharit [morning prayers] in Ethan’s apartment, and she used melodies I had never heard before. I was drawn in. My long battle to pretend that prayer wasn’t powerful and God couldn’t play a real role in my life was lost. I remember crying during Shacharit, because it felt like the end of a long journey. It was a journey that had taken me far away from the spiritual side of Judaism, yet one that led me back with fresh goals and energy. In truth, that morning was not the end of the journey, but a first step in a much longer path to build a world of Empowered Judaism.¹²²

Kaunfer is suggesting that the experience of connecting to God facilitated by prayer is able to motivate communal involvement. That is, when prayer is able to create this meaningful experience, Jews are more likely to remain involved in their communities. They will be “drawn in” to participating in more prayer services, returning to the Jewish community “with fresh goals and energy.” He takes the fact that “the vast majority of Jews who have engaged in the past decade with independent minyanim and other forms of Empowered Judaism are in their twenties and thirties”—many of whom, like him, had previously “dropped out of Jewish engagement altogether”—as evidence that this meaningful connection provided in these vibrant prayer services is able to motivate this renewed involvement in the Jewish community.¹²³

Furthermore, Kaunfer claims that participating in these communities provides individuals with the skills, habits, and commitments that form them into Empowered Jews. Regularly being

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¹²³. Ibid., 143, 66.
drawn back to a prayer service that encourages participation, the individual will eventually become habituated to actively engaging in worship. Additionally, I already mentioned how these communities offer worshipers classes on “a range of practical skills” such as “how to lead services” and “how to read Torah.” Therefore, these communities not only habituate Jews to being actively involved in their religious life, but also provide the skills necessary for this engagement.

Lastly, Kaunfer argues, these Jews—now accustomed to an active mode of worship and trained to lead prayer services and participate in any role during worship—also become committed to “building communities and institutions” that can provide others with the opportunity to gain these skills, habits, and commitments. To illustrate, consider Kaunfer’s account of the rapid spread of these prayer communities:

The rise of sixty independent minyanim in the past decade was fueled by the mobility and transience of young Jews and relied on the power of each motivated individual who saw something in one city and said, ‘I can do that in my town.’ In its most basic form, the spread of independent minyanim can be traced to networks of founders formed years earlier, a core of successful minyanim that served as a model, and a critical mass of Jews with diverse backgrounds looking for an alternative form of religious expression.

With the ability to lead prayer themselves, and motivated to further empower themselves by building and joining these communities, these individuals can establish new minyanim wherever work or school takes them next, empowering more and more Jews in more and more locations.

In sum, the experience of God formed in these prayer experiences motivates the individual to participate in communities where they gain the skills, habits, and commitments that form them

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124. This is my own claim that I take to be a logical consequence of Kaunfer’s previous assertions regarding the way synagogue aesthetics that discourage participation habituate Jews into a passive mode of worship.
126. Ibid., 156.
127. Ibid., 66.
into Kaunfer’s ideal subjects, Empowered Jews. For Kaunfer, though these Empowered Jews “may never be the majority in the Jewish community,” they “have the potential to engage the majority of Jews in a deep way. Some will join traditional synagogues and enliven those communities. Some will form new entities that will involve Jews in ways we can’t even predict. Empowered Jews—wherever they go—will have a significant impact on Jewish life in America.”

In other words, these Empowered Jews will act as a "critical mass" in the wider community as well, revitalizing Judaism across the country, and creating “a world of Empowered Judaism, where every Jew has the potential to take hold of the gift of Jewish heritage.”

Before I conclude this chapter, it is worth noting the many striking similarities between Kaunfer’s vision of Empowered Judaism and the Protestant Christian revivalism of the Second Great Awakening. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, preachers such as Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) and Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) began holding large events called revivals, where they would lead group prayers and deliver highly emotional sermons to crowded halls with the goal of getting worshipers to shake off the passive view that salvation is entirely in God’s hands and realize that they are free moral agents who must actively choose to accept God into their hearts. Like Kaunfer’s independent minyanim, these revivals aimed for an emotional transformation that formed a personal relationship between the individual and God. Additionally, the aesthetic experience of prayer in these revivals was carefully managed in order to produce an emotional outpouring among people who were usually unwilling to do so.

128. Ibid., 129.
129. Ibid., 161.
131. Ibid., 96-97.
in public. As with Kaunfer’s minyanim, this was done by making sure there were enough skilled practitioners in the crowd whose public display of emotions could inspire others. These revivals were also noted for their egalitarianism by allowing men and women to worship together. Lastly, worshipers would leave these revivals eager to share this experience with others and reshape society by joining or forming social reform movements such as the teetotalers or the abolitionists. Although there are, of course, major differences between these movements, it would be interesting, in a future project, to ask whether we might characterize the Independent Minyan movement as a form of “Jewish revivalism,” sharing much in common with the Protestant revival movements that have shaped American history. If these minyanim ever achieve a proportionate measure of success within the Jewish community, Kaunfer and others in the movement might well be placed among the great revivalist leaders in American religious history.

Leaving this possibility aside, it is worth reviewing where Kaunfer’s analysis leaves us. Think back to the character we encountered in my example at the end of Part Two: the individual for whom worship was so meaningless and uncompelling that she disengaged entirely from Judaism. To make the ensuing discussion easier to follow, I will give her the name Lauren.

It has now been years since Lauren attended synagogue services. Although she might occasionally wish that there was a way for her to become involved in Judaism, she cannot bear the idea of sitting through another uninspiring service, and she knows of no other real opportunities to find that engagement. One day, however, she reconnects with a friend who grew up with her at her childhood synagogue. This friend has become involved in one of the

132. Ibid., 97-102.
133. Ibid., 108.
134. Ibid., 5-8.
independent minyanim that reflects Kaunfer’s vision of prayer. She wants Lauren to accompany her to one of their services, but Lauren hesitates when learning that they use a traditional liturgy, remembering her experience at an Orthodox service. After her friend assures her that there will be no gender segregation and women will be just as included as they are at her old synagogue, Lauren agrees to go.

When they arrive, they find a small, low-ceilinged room with limited seating. Unable to situate herself in the back so she can observe this new service at a distance, she finds herself right in the middle of the liturgical action as more people begin to arrive and fill up every corner of the tiny room. Then the prayer leader begins to chant the liturgy in Hebrew and everyone joins her. The sound of the liturgy coming from all around her reverberates through the close quarters, overwhelming Lauren’s emotional barriers. Performed in Hebrew, the sound is mysterious, its meaning hidden. She may glance down at the translation provided in the prayerbook, and though it might be full of strange and challenging language, she can tell that the true power of these prayers lies not in the meaning of these specific words, but in the emotions their sounds elicit. Though she has forgotten much of the rudimentary Hebrew she learned as a child, the melody is simple enough to follow and she feels compelled to join. In this complex soundscape no one would notice if she just hummed along. With everyone facing the same direction, no one would notice if she let herself become so involved that she started to move in response to the music. In fact, in a room full of people actively expressing their emotions through prayer, no one would be surprised if she allowed herself to open up to the power of the liturgy. She begins to hum and sway along with these sounds, finally letting herself become emotionally vulnerable, opening her heart to the sound of the liturgy.
Each blessing, psalm, and praise in the prayer service come one after another without interruption. This “chain of aesthetics” takes her on an affective journey and unlocks emotional experiences. Then the worshipers transition to the Amidah and a hush falls over the crowd as a solemn silence suddenly fills the room. The sounds that enveloped her disappear; without this immediate sense of everyone around her, she exists in her own silent world. In this moment she feels the closeness of God; she feels as if she is standing in the divine presence. For perhaps the first time in her life, she feels as if she is connecting to something real and meaningful in worship.

After the service ends, Lauren is introduced by her friend to many of the participants at the minyan. She learns that many of them grew up like she did, habituated to being passive during synagogue services, and lacking the skills to learn how to engage in prayer themselves. They tell her about the training programs offered by the minyan leadership and about their own experiences learning how to participate in every role with confidence. Lauren soon realizes that if her friend, who was also raised in the same passive synagogue setting as she was, is now able to actively participate in creating such a powerful experience, she can learn to do so as well. That emotional experience of connecting to God motivates her to come back regularly. She begins to take classes where she develops her skills, and eventually, with help and guidance from this supportive community, has the opportunity to lead prayers herself.

After a time, Lauren ends up moving to a different city for a job. Although this city may lack a minyan where she can experience this connection, she has become habituated to being active in her engagement and cannot go back to a synagogue where she will be expected to sit quietly again. Yet she no longer has to because she now possesses the skills to create her own
minyan where she can train others also looking for this meaningful engagement, and those others can eventually go forth and do the same.

The preceding example has illustrated my central claim in this chapter: namely, that for Kaunfer, prayer is able to initiate a process of subject formation that is particularly important given his understanding of the specific crisis threatening Jewish life today. As we have seen, Kaunfer provides us with a vision of an ideal subject, an Empowered Jew. This subject is habituated to being actively engaged in worship and therefore possesses the skills necessary to lead prayer and participate in any other role during worship services, and is committed to joining and forming communities that will deepen these skills, habits, and commitments while helping other Jews to also become “empowered.” Yet Kaunfer claims that modern changes to the liturgy and poor aesthetic decisions in the worship services of most liberal Jewish denominations have left American Jews passive and emotionally disconnected from Judaism, leading many to drop out of Jewish life altogether. The solution, for Kaunfer, is a reinvigorated prayer service. In his view, when prayer is performed in a way that encourages participation and allows the full aesthetic power of the liturgy to engage the emotions, it is able to form an emotional connection to God that motivates worshipers to become involved in communities that habituate them into being actively engaged in prayer, thus committing them to further developing the skills necessary for this active engagement by participating in, and building, Jewish communities where others can have similar experiences. Put differently, for Kaunfer, prayer is able to initiate a process of subject formation by motivating the individual to participate in communities where she can gain the skills, habits, and commitments that form her into an Empowered Jew. These newly formed Jewish subjects are equipped to go out and serve as a “critical mass” who, by creating communities where others can experience this emotional connection, will inspire people in all
sectors of the Jewish community to also become actively engaged in Jewish life. Thus, in helping to reverse the widespread passivity, Empowered Jews can overcome the “crisis of meaning and engagement” threatening American Jewish life as a whole.
CONCLUSION

The theories of prayer I have explicated in the previous chapters represent my attempt to fill the gap in current scholarship on American Jewish theories of prayer that I outlined in the introduction. I have attempted to analyze two such theories—not in order to synthesize or to clarify my own beliefs, but rather to tell a richer story about twentieth and twenty-first century American Judaism and contribute to broader conversations in the academic study of religion. As we saw, in two influential strands of contemporary American Jewish thought, prayer is understood in a way that displays a concern with subject formation—that is, with forming particular types of individuals in possession of the skills, habits, and commitments. Furthermore, we saw that these theories of prayer were constructed in such a way as to cast these skills, habits, and commitments as necessary given certain problems that plague contemporary life. In this conclusion, I will compare and contrast the two theories outlined in the previous chapters, highlighting important similarities and critical differences. I will then finish by identifying a number of questions raised by this thesis that could enrich ongoing discussions in the study of American Judaism, ritual studies, and the academic study of religion as a whole.

SOLOVEITCHIK AND KAUNFER: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

While Soloveitchik’s ideal subjects are committed to shaping their actions in modern society to be in conformity with God’s will, Kaunfer’s Empowered Jews are committed to reshaping the Jewish community. In other words, for Soloveitchik, the ideal subject’s activities are directed at society as a whole whereas, for Kaunfer, this subject is directed exclusively at the
Jewish community. To be sure, it appears that these projects are similar in the sense that
Kaunfer’s emphasis on producing lay Jews rather than religious specialists allows for more Jews
to be able to participate in modern life while also taking active control of their own Jewish
engagement. Nevertheless, the differences remain significant. For Soloveitchik, the ideal subject
is not simply one who is able to live in both communities, but one who allows his commitments
as a Jew to shape his actions outside the Jewish community. This is not what Kaunfer is
imagining, since he does not concern himself with broader problems plaguing society as a whole.
Rather, the problems that he takes to require urgent solutions arise within the Jewish community
itself. This brings us to the next point of comparison: these thinkers’ critiques of contemporary
society.

Although Soloveitchik is concerned with society as a whole while Kaunfer is focused
specifically on the Jewish community, the critiques they provide are both framed in terms of
aesthetics and over-intellectualization. Soloveitchik critiques modern man not only for being an
“aesthete,” but for transforming worship into a purely aesthetic experience that is based on the
idea that religion can provide an escape from mundane existence. This expectation that we are
supposed to gain something from worship, that we can escape reality through religious life,
allows the worshiper to avoid facing the hard facts of his finitude. So too, Kaunfer thinks that a
prayer service whose liturgy has been heavily edited to reflect modern liberal beliefs also leaves
worshipers unchallenged. They agree, then, that one central element of the problems with prayer
is an over-focus on its cognitive-intellectual aspects. That is, they both agree that the modern
desire to make everything fit into rational terms has robbed prayer of its transformational power.
For Soloveitchik, however, this is a symptom of the larger issue of modern man’s obsession with
success; by contrast, for Kaunfer, this is cast as a factor that stands at root of why Jews are dropping out of Jewish life.

When it comes to the role of prayer, there are a number of interesting points of comparison between the two—too many, in fact, to discuss in full. I will therefore only consider those points most relevant to the topic of subject formation, the most important being the specific way prayer contributes to this process. Both thinkers see prayer as a motivator, as a way to commit the participant to a certain mode of life that forms him or her into this subject. That is, both see prayer as a way to motivate involvement in a broader process of subject formation that takes place outside of the prayer experience. For Soloveitchik, the individual fully becomes an ideal subject only when he leads a life that involves both reaching for success and withdrawing one’s reach in accordance with God’s will. For Kaunfer, it is by being involved in communities that encourage participation and provide opportunities to acquire the skills that allow for real engagement in prayer that an individual become an Empowered Jew. In both cases prayer forms subjects motivated to participate in those endeavors. Furthermore, in both cases, this motivation is taken to emerge from the experience of God facilitated by prayer.

The most significant difference, though, is that for Soloveitchik, prayer cannot create this motivation on its own, whereas Kaunfer claims it can. Put differently, for Kaunfer, prayer instigates the process of subject formation, whereas for Soloveitchik, prayer is a recurring element in a wider series of activities that allow prayer to work. Soloveitchik sees prayer as being embedded in a life already lived according to the divine will. Rather than beginning the process, prayer serves as a way to continually motivate this involvement, regularly reminding man of his true needs as he again and again runs the risk of becoming lost amid the dizzying array of false needs presented by modern society. But Kaunfer seems to see prayer as being able
to motivate this commitment on its own. To illustrate this, imagine a pinball machine. Kaunfer imagines prayer to be like the spring that allows you to launch the ball, in that prayer can launch this empowering journey on its own. Soloveitchik, however, imagines prayer to be more like one of the narrow points with spinning wheels on either side that propels the ball forward, but only if it is already in motion.¹ In short, it would seem that the critical difference between these models is one of function. While they both take prayer to motivate the function of prayer for Kaunfer is to instigate this process of subject formation, whereas the function for Soloveitchik is to continually maintain the momentum of this process by continually recommitting the individual to participate in the mode of life in question.

This functional difference gets at the heart of what each thinker is attempting to accomplish. We can safely assume that the sort of subject Soloveitchik imagines as participating in prayer is a Modern Orthodox Jew who already tries to live according to the divine norms incumbent upon him. He does not need prayer to launch him on a journey. Rather, as an individual who also participates in a modern society obsessed with success, prayer functions to continually remind him of his commitments. Kaunfer, by contrast, is not imagining an individual already living a Jewish life. For him, the individual who most concerns him is in danger of dropping out of Jewish life or has already done so. Therefore, what Kaunfer is doing is attempting to demonstrate the value of prayer. Soloveitchik takes it as a given that the individual already engages in prayer. Therefore, he is not trying to convince people that they should pray; rather, he is describing what happens when they pray. This could potentially be read as a way to legitimate the choices of Modern Orthodox Jews by arguing that it is precisely because such

¹. This simile is especially applicable, since the Hebrew word for the crisis that Soloveitchik describes as necessary to prayer is tzara, which has the same root as the word for “narrow” and is used in a similar way as the English expression of being in “narrow straights.”
individuals are already engaged in prayer that they are able to maintain this dual commitment to living traditional lives while participating in modern society.

**QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In a longer project, it would possible to highlight further similarities and differences between these theories. For the sake of space, however, I will stop here in order to suggest how these theories might contribute to conversations in the academic study of religion and ritual. In particular, I will now build on my portrait of these two American Jewish theories of prayer to pose a series of questions for future study.

The first question is as follows: what should we make of the fact that, for both of the thinkers we have encountered, prayer comes to be implicated in the broader problems they associate with contemporary life? Is, for example, the petitionary nature of some modes of prayer significant here? Could it be the case that when prayer is understood as being petitionary, it sometimes becomes not only a space to express personal needs, but also an arena for attempts to wrestle with broader needs facing society as a whole? Similarly, why is it the case that, for Soloveitchik and Kaunfer, processes of subject formation seem to be the solution to these problems in contemporary life? Is their American context relevant? Does the fact that they inhabit a cultural space that stresses individualism and freedom of choice play a role in generating a concern with prayer as a possible way to produce subjects who are motivated—who are trained to desire or choose, we might say—to participate in Jewish religious life? Do both of our thinkers search for a way to shape individuals into the sorts of subjects who will choose Judaism in a society where religious affiliation is voluntary rather than coerced?
Building on this, we might also ask the following question: do Soloveitchik and Kaunfer have something to offer contemporary debates about the role of religion in American society? As noted above, both emphasize the idea that prayer might motivate a certain type of commitment to religious life. Could this idea be useful when, for example, we attempt to explain why religious communities continue to thrive despite long-standing predictions regarding the secularization of American society? Do these theories perhaps suggest that prayer, by apparently committing the individual to certain modes of communal praxis, might be a factor explaining why people remain involved in religious life?

We might, finally, raise the following point: how might Soloveitchik and Kaunfer enrich other models of prayer, such as the one (cited earlier in my thesis) developed by Gill? Recall that, for both Soloveitchik and Kaunfer, the aesthetics of prayer help engender the perception of an encounter with God. Does this suggest, perhaps, that the aesthetics of prayer can serve to demonstrate, to participants, the apparent reality of certain religious claims held by a community? Drawing on Gill’s language, could aesthetics be crucial to how communities come to experience a “radical other” during prayer? Does this idea that an aesthetically generated perception of an encounter with God motivates involvement in further ritual performances suggest a way that prayer stands in relation to other practices within a given religious tradition?

Answering such questions, of course, lies beyond the scope of this project. My hope, though, is that this thesis has suggested that American Jewish theories of prayer might not only be valuable objects of analysis for understanding developments in Judaism, but also contribute to wider discussions of ritual and prayer within the academic study of religion.


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