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Prayer in a Time of Pandemic: Loneliness, Liturgy, and Virtual Community

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Emet le-Ya'akov

**Facing the Truths of History:
Essays in Honor of Jacob J. Schacter**



Photo by Sari Goodfriend



Emet le-Ya'akov

**Facing the Truths of History:
Essays in Honor of Jacob J. Schacter**

Edited by Zev Eleff
and Shaul Seidler-Feller

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CHAPTER 23

Prayer in a Time of Pandemic: Loneliness, Liturgy, and Virtual Community*

Lois C. Dubin

“The act of praying is the religious response to the experience of *tzarah*, distressing existential narrowness, the awareness of being shut in and sealed off.”

“The community of prayer . . . means a community of common pain, of common suffering.”

In March 2020, our lives were turned upside-down by the sudden eruption of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the COVID-19 pandemic. As the new normal became staggeringly unpredictable, we were beset by miasmas of fear and dread. All were touched to the quick by the mass illness and death and the ensuing lockdowns and isolation.

Houses of worship were forced to close as governments imposed severe restrictions on indoor gatherings. The Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) advised “Stay Home; Save Lives!” and issued “Shabbat without Shul: A Guide.”¹ Some non-Orthodox synagogues began to hold regular virtual worship

* I thank Benjamin Braude, Bruce Bromberg-Seltzer, Edward Feld, Warren Zev Harvey, Jennifer Luddy, Jane Myers, Elana and James Ponet, Susan Shapiro, and Carol Zaleski for valuable comments and suggestions.

1 See “RCA-OU Statements: STAY HOME,” Rabbis.org, March 18, 2020, <https://rabbis.org/rca-ou-statements-stay-home-half-day-fast-called-for-tomorrow-thursday-march-19/>; Yaakov Hoffman, “Shabbat without Shul: A Guide,” Rabbis.org, March 19, 2020, <https://>

services via livestream and Zoom. Some years earlier, a few congregations had started to livestream services to meet the needs of the housebound. In 2020, this once-supplemental option became the vital means by which many communities maintained spiritual and social ties among their members.²

This essay addresses the phenomenon of COVID-era digital worship services by focusing on individual experience. My own reflections revolve around two axes: 1) the classic theme of *keva* (fixity or structure) vs. *kavvanah* (intention or devotion) in prayer, and 2) certain formulations on prayer of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), the great Torah scholar, luminary, and intellectual titan of Modern Orthodoxy and twentieth-century Judaism. Borrowing the bon mot of structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, I find Soloveitchik’s ideas “good to think with”—particularly, his discussions of prayer as cry and petition arising from *zorekh* (need) and crisis; his anatomy of depth and surface crises, which he at times linked to divergent views of Maimonides (1138–1204) and Nahmanides (1194–1270); his analysis of human nature in terms of the intellectual-scientific prowess of Adam I and the existential loneliness and spiritual seeking of Adam II; and his evocations of the “lonely man of faith”³ and the “covenantal community.” It is a privilege to contribute my thoughts to this volume in honor of my graduate-school classmate and friend Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, who studied with Soloveitchik and furthers his legacy in so many ways, not least as dean of the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Institute in Brookline from 2000 to 2005 and throughout his own ongoing career as rabbi, scholar, and teacher.

rabbis.org/shabbat-without-shul-a-guide/. See more generally J. David Bleich, “Survey of Recent Halakhic Literature: Coronavirus Queries (Part 1),” *Tradition* 52, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 90–116, on communal prayer, including “porch *minyanim*,” and Mark L. Trencher, “The Orthodox Jewish Community and the Coronavirus: Halacha Grapples with the Pandemic,” *Contemporary Jewry* 41, no. 1 (March 2021): 123–139.

- 2 For Conservative and Reform responses, see Elliot Dorff and Pamela Barmash, “CJLS Guidance for Remote Minyanim in a Time of COVID-19,” Rabbinical Assembly, March 17, 2020, <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/cjls-guidance-remote-minyanim-time-covid-19>; and “COVID-19 Resources for Congregations,” Union for Reform Judaism, <https://urj.org/what-we-do/congregational-life/covid-19-resources-congregations>, respectively.

See more generally Ruth Langer, “Jewish Liturgy during the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Vignettes from Boston Suburbs,” *Contemporary Jewry* 41, no. 1 (March 2021): 23–37; Levi Cooper, “Kaddish during COVID: Mourning Rituals during a Pandemic,” *Contemporary Jewry* 41, no. 1 (March 2021): 39–69; and Erin Leib Smokler, ed., *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2021).

- 3 Using Soloveitchik’s original phrase throughout this essay, I consider “man” an all-inclusive, genderless term referring to any human being, not just to males. I take “lonely man of faith” to mean the “lonely individual” or “lonely person” of faith.

I, too, in that sorrowful and fearful spring of 2020, discovered virtual prayer services—at first, weekly with my local Conservative congregation, Congregation B'nai Israel in Northampton, Massachusetts, and then daily with the unaffiliated B'nai Jeshurun in New York City.

I well remember the first time when, from home lockdown, I joined CBI Zoom services. It was so comforting to see fellow congregants' faces and heartening to chant together the familiar melodies and words of customary Jewish prayers, led with dedication and compassion by Rabbi Justin David. As we tentatively, self-consciously reached out to one another from our onscreen Zoom boxes, we offered mutual assurance that it was meaningful to congregate—even remotely—to welcome the Sabbath and to pray together. At a time when almost all contact with people outside one's household was impossible, I considered seeing faces on Zoom a much better alternative to seeing no one at all. It was social contact, though not physical or in-person. I myself felt grateful for Zoom and even the telephone!

When I longed for Sabbath morning services, not then offered by CBI, a friend directed me to the livestreamed services of B'nai Jeshurun. I was moved by the beauty of their Hebrew chanting and music, as well as inspired and fortified by the moral seriousness of their clergy—Rabbi José Rolando (Roly) Matalon, Rabbi Felicia Sol, and Cantor Ari Priven—praying and speaking from Manhattan, then one of the pandemic's epicenters. Physically distanced from one another in their empty sanctuary, they ministered to longtime congregants as well as far-flung, first-time participants through cameras, microphones, pixels, and screens. Eventually, I became a regular in their daily evening services on Zoom. My experience cried out: *dorsheni!* I was intrigued: what was so compelling about this practice of daily virtual prayer—for me and for others?

The conjunction of the COVID pandemic and the digital revolution made online, remote, virtual congregational services a widespread phenomenon. By now, many Jews have gotten used to worship services, classes, and *shiv'ah* gatherings on Zoom and have come to appreciate the opportunities of connection with the physically distant. With onscreen prayer increasingly integrated with restarted in-person prayer in hybrid, multi-access formats, it is natural to take stock: what does the “virtual turn” portend for Jews collectively? Since that spring, we have been living ever more in a strange but now familiar hybrid way—sometimes sharing space with other bodies in physical locations, yet sometimes seeing and interacting with the images and voices of our selves on screens, physically distanced but somehow present to one another. Do the remoteness of Zoom and livestreams tend to reinforce distance or, perhaps surprisingly, can

“digital religion” enhance a sense of community, shared commitments, and spiritual intimacy among the physically absent?⁴

In this essay, in the spirit of philosophy *ex eventu*, I reflect upon the individual experience of becoming a regular, committed participant in remote, virtual collective Jewish prayer, and I ask: how did this experience yield—for me and for many others—unexpected and deep meaning?

As I ponder the COVID online prayer experience, I find Soloveitchik’s ideas resonant and illuminating, knowing full well that with freshly scarred eyes I read and apply his ideas in a new direction.⁵ His mode of writing in his philosophical, reflective, non-halakhic work has been characterized by some as confessional and subjective; as a human-centered “philosophical anthropology”; as existentialist and phenomenological, for his focus on loneliness, anxiety, and alienation.⁶ As Soloveitchik deftly wove his own personal experience into his analytical expositions, I consider it fitting to bring his ideas to bear on our own moment of existential crisis.

The COVID experience also led me to reconsider the tension between *keva* and *kavvanah* in Jewish prayer. Many moderns tend to prize *kavvanah* as the touchstone of individual authenticity. Yet, I have come to a greater appreciation of the benefits of set fixity and, not least, how it became enmeshed with heartfelt yearning in our time of collective distress.

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- 4 See, for example, Heidi A. Campbell, *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World* (2020), <https://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/188004>; Tish Harrison Warren, “Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html>; Ron Wolfson and Steven Windmueller, “The Rise of the Online Synagogue,” *Tablet Magazine*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/rise-of-online-synagogue>; Giulia Evolvi, “Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, (Hyper)Mediated Spaces, and Materiality,” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 6, no. 1 (2022): 9–25.
- 5 Compare Shira Wolosky, “The Lonely Woman of Faith,” *Judaism* 52, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2003): 3–18.
- 6 See Avi Sagi, *Tradition vs. Traditionalism: Contemporary Perspectives in Jewish Thought*, trans. Batya Stein (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2008), 21–42; Reuven Ziegler, “Hidden Man, Revealed Man: The Role of Personal Experience in Rav Soloveitchik’s Thought,” in *How I Love Your Torah: Essays in Honor of Yeshivat Har Etzion on the Forty-Fifth Anniversary of Its Founding*, ed. Reuven Ziegler (Alon Shvut: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 2014), 198–219; Alex S. Ozar, “The Emergence of Max Scheler: Understanding Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s Philosophical Anthropology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 2 (April 2016): 178–206; Lawrence Kaplan, “The Religious Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,” *Tradition* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1973): 43–64; Dov Schwartz, *Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik on the Experience of Prayer*, trans. Edward Levin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), vi–xxv; David Schatz, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Western Culture: An Enigmatic Dialogue,” *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 506–530.

On Prayer and Crisis: Soloveitchik, Maimonides, and Nahmanides

Need, distress, crisis, petition—these themes recur when Soloveitchik focused phenomenological and existentialist lenses on prayer. Surely praise, thanksgiving, and celebration are also significant motives and moments of prayer, but these are not my concerns here. My discussion (which is neither halakhic nor comprehensive in scope) draws on Soloveitchik's published writings and recorded lectures, from the 1950s–1970s, as well as other materials subsequently edited by close students and associates.⁷

Soloveitchik considered prayer as a dialogue between the solitary, lonely individual and God, the One Alone, uniquely solitary and lonely.⁸ Prayer comes from a state of *zarah* (distress), from being in very *zar* (narrow) straits. “*Tefillah* [prayer], according to Halakhah, is closely knit with the experience of *tzarah*, distress or—to be more loyal to the literal semantics—constriction.”⁹ From the depths, with a “feeling of absolute dependence,” a person cries out in prayer.¹⁰ As Jacob J. Schacter explicated, “When someone becomes fully aware of their lack of capacity to affect their own lives, at their core they recognize their total dependency on God. . . . This is the awareness we have to bring to every prayer experience.”¹¹

For Soloveitchik, “prayer is the tale of an aching and yearning heart,” of “the storminess of . . . soul and spirit” that a person yearning for God strives to express in words.¹² An inchoate cry becomes the articulation of needs by means of the

7 Also useful is Abraham R. Besdin's looser adaptation of Soloveitchik's ideas in *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979).

8 See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Religious Definitions of Man and His Social Institutions Part 2,” YU Torah, January 2, 1958, <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767783/rabbi-joseph-b-soloveitchik/religious-definitions-of-man-and-his-social-institutions-part-2/>, and idem, “Prayer as Dialogue,” in Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979), 71–88.

9 Idem, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” in idem, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2003), 29.

10 Idem, “The Crisis of Human Finitude,” in idem, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler (Hoboken, NJ: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2003), 173 (with explicit mention of Schleiermacher). Compare idem, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 35; and idem, “Reflections on the *Amidah*,” in idem, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2003), 156–157, 171–175.

11 Jacob J. Schacter, “The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Dr. Joseph Soloveitchik,” January 13, 2013, https://maimonides.org/IS_RSSFeed.aspx?feedtype=folder&feedrelationid=965209.

12 Soloveitchik, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 20; and idem, “Reflections on the *Amidah*,” 146. See also idem, “Torah, *Tefillah*, and *Avodah Shebalev*,” in *Derashot Harav: Selected Lectures of*

set liturgy, recited thrice daily and traditionally attributed to the ancient Great Assembly. The *amidah* (standing prayer) expresses praise and thanksgiving, but the majority of its nineteen benedictions ask God for something fundamental and vital, such as health, protection, or redemption. Thus:

Prayer in Judaism . . . 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. . . . The person in need is summoned to pray. . . . Man finds his need-awareness, himself, in prayer.¹³

Prayer is inseparable from petition, needs, distress, and crisis: “A person should engage in prayer only when he finds himself in trouble, in a predicament or in need,” and “man is always in need because he is always in crisis and distress.”¹⁴ Prayer is quintessentially the expression of a “crisis consciousness” or a “crisis awareness.”¹⁵

Soloveitchik starkly distinguished between two kinds of crisis, “surface” and “depth.” Surface crises involve “all forms of conventional suffering: illness, famine, war, poverty, loss of physical freedom, and, last but not least, death.” In contrast, the depth crisis is of “existential-metaphysical origin,” as humans encounter within themselves the “strangeness of human destiny” and their “own reality, fate and destiny.” Surface crises are experienced as “external, objective, impersonal”—visible to all, collective, and intermittent—while a depth crisis is experienced as “existential, personal”—internal, subjective, and constant.¹⁶

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, ed. Arnold Lustiger (Union City, NJ: Ohr Publishing, 2003), 212–213.

13 Idem, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” *Tradition* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 65–66. On need as the reason to pray and the centrality of petition, see idem, “Philosophy and Origin of Prayer—Part 2,” YU Torah, February 26, 1972, https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767773/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/Philosophy_and_Origin_of_Prayer_-_Part_2.

14 Idem, “The Crisis of Human Finitude,” 159; and idem, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 35.

15 Idem, “The Crisis of Human Finitude,” 159–167.

16 Idem, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 30–32. On the depth crisis, see also idem, “The Crisis of Human Finitude,” 164, and idem, “Prayer as Dialogue,” 81–82.

At times, Soloveitchik related surface crisis to Nahmanides and depth crisis to Maimonides.¹⁷ In so doing, he offered a new understanding of their famous disagreement regarding the prescribed daily recitation of the statutory prayers: whether the source of the obligation is Torah law (Maimonides's view) or rabbinic enactment (Nahmanides's view).

In *Sefer ha-mizvot*, Maimonides counts daily prayer as positive Torah commandment no. 5, warranted by biblical injunctions to “serve God” (Ex. 23:25, Deut. 6:13, 13:5) and “to serve Him with all your heart and soul” (Deut. 11:13), adding the tannaitic *Sifrei* explanation “to serve Him’ means prayer.”¹⁸ For Maimonides, worshipping God through prayer is a specific duty to be fulfilled every day, following upon the primary obligations to believe in God’s existence and unity and to “love” and “fear” God. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides elaborates:

The Sages said, ‘what is service of the heart? Prayer.’ The number of prayers is not fixed in the Torah, nor is their format, and neither does the Torah prescribe a fixed time for prayer. . . . Rather, this commandment obligates each person to pray, supplicate, and praise the Holy One, blessed be He, to the best of his ability every day; to then request and plead for what he needs; and after that praise and thank God for all that He has showered on him.¹⁹

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- 17 In “The Crisis of Human Finitude,” 159–167, Soloveitchik does not mention Maimonides and Nahmanides. He does mention them in “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 28–36, but does not explicitly link them to depth and surface crises (though the linkage is implied). The essay “Reflections on the *Amidah*,” 145–150, discusses Maimonides, Nahmanides, and distress but not crisis. Explicit association of Maimonides with depth crisis and of Nahmanides with surface crisis appears in “Prayer as Dialogue,” 79–82. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein claims Soloveitchik’s view to be that “the Rambam [Maimonides] fundamentally agrees with the Ramban [Nahmanides]. . . . Tefilla is obligatory only ‘in times of trouble,’ but the Rambam perceives man as existing in a perpetual state of crisis.” See Aharon Lichtenstein, “Prayer in the Teachings of Rav Soloveitchik zt”l,” May 1996, ed. Aviad Hacoen, trans. Kaeren Fish and Ronnie Ziegler, <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/rav-soloveitchik/prayer-teachings-rav-soloveitchik-ztl>. See also Schwartz, *Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik*, 87–93, and Lawrence J. Kaplan, “Review Essay: *Worship of the Heart*,” *Hakirah* 5 (Fall 2007): 106–108.
- 18 Charles B. Chavel, ed. and trans., *The Commandments: Sefer Ha-Mitzvot of Maimonides*, vol. 1 (London; New York: Soncino Press, 1967), 8–9 (no. 5). See *Sifrei: Be-midbar Devarim* (Vilna: Samuel Joseph Fuenn and Abraham Zvi Rosenkrantz, 1866), 63b (sec. 41).
- 19 See Menachem Kellner, trans., *The Code of Maimonides, Book Two: The Book of Love* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004), 17–18 (*Hilkhot tefillah u-birkat kohanim* 1:1–2).

In his *hassagot* (critiques) to the *Sefer ha-mizvot*, Naḥmanides vigorously counters Maimonides. Naḥmanides argues that daily prayer was mandated not by Torah commandment but rather by rabbinic enactment, relying upon b. *Berakhot* 21a, which states that prayer, unlike the *Shema* and grace after meals, is only “by rabbinic law.”²⁰ Further, Naḥmanides offers a more expansive exegesis of “to serve Him with all your heart and soul”—not limiting it specifically to daily worship but rather extending it to every action and commandment undertaken in the service of God. For serving with all one’s heart is the proper spirit and orientation that should characterize one’s entire relation to God.

Fundamentally, for Naḥmanides, prayer is not an obligation but rather a voluntary offering in response to the divine *hesed* (lovingkindness) that flows towards us:

Certainly prayer is not an obligation at all. But rather it is a quality of our blessed Creator that with *hesed* He listens and responds whenever we call out to Him. And the main point of the verse “to serve Him with all your heart” is that it is a positive commandment that all of our service to God, the exalted, be with all our heart, that is, with the desired wholehearted *kavvanah*, focused upon His Name, and without negative thoughts.²¹

Some have used “gift” or “privilege” for this conception of prayer, but, as Rabbi Edward Feld suggests, it may rather be read as relational—as an evocation of the voluntary, mutual relationship of love between God and humans.

Finally, Naḥmanides discusses prayer specifically as a distress call. In commenting on the aforementioned passage in *Sifrei*, he explains that it refers “to praying to Him in times of *zarot* [troubles], and that our eyes and hearts should be raised towards Him like the eyes of servants towards their masters . . .”—in other words, in supplicatory dependence. Citing Num. 10:9 and I Kings 8:35–38, he explains that the Torah commands the Israelites to cry out with prayer and trumpet in times of communal trouble. He quotes Solomon’s statement that God listens to “every prayer and supplication” from both the collective people

20 Moses Naḥmanides, *Hassagot*, in *Sefer ha-mizvot le-ha-Rambam* (New York: Jacob Shurkin, 1955), 3a–4a (no. 5). In contrast, Maimonides asserts that rabbinic law prescribes the *details* of daily prayer but not the *obligation* itself, which is biblical.

21 Unless otherwise noted, quotations—in this paragraph and the next—from Naḥmanides’s *hassagot* on positive commandment no. 5 are my translation with the help of Rabbi Edward Feld. I thank both Rabbis Feld and Bruce Bromberg-Seltzer for their careful study of this passage with me.

Israel and individuals, “when each knows what afflicts his heart.”²² Communal disaster, originally defined as war against an enemy in Israel’s own land, was extended in post-Temple times to disasters anywhere such as drought, floods, famine, plague, and illness. Naḥmanides concludes that perhaps prayer could be counted as a Torah commandment “in times of *zarot*, for we believe that God, the blessed and exalted, listens to prayer and that He is the one who responds to cries and prayers by saving us in times of *zarot*.”

Naḥmanides is in fact alluding to Maimonides’s positive commandment no. 59, the obligation to blow the trumpets in the Sanctuary in times of collective trouble, which involves both recognition of divine governance and the need for human repentance.²³ For Maimonides, the injunction to cry out for divine assistance in times of trouble (no. 59) is separate and apart from the duty of daily prayer or worship of the heart (no. 5), the regular offering of praise, petition, and gratitude to the Creator.

We may say: Naḥmanides accepts Maimonides’s positive commandment no. 59 but not no. 5. In one sense, Naḥmanides conflates nos. 5 and 59, while in another, he subsumes no. 5 under no. 59. Both scholars agree that crying out to God in times of collective calamity is a Torah commandment. Yet, in acknowledging a Torah commandment only in circumstances of great distress and not for rabbinically enjoined daily prayer, Naḥmanides hews to the crisis model in b. *Ta’anit* (on fast days) rather than the daily normalcy of b. *Berakhot* (on regular prayers and blessings). Thus, the distress call seems more salient in Naḥmanides’s view of prayer than in Maimonides’s.

Their divergent positions on the source of daily worship bespeak these two thinkers’ characteristic approaches, Maimonides’s rationalist philosophy and Naḥmanides’s mystical Kabbalah. For Maimonides, Torah-obligated daily prayer is one means by which humans increase their love and fear of God, as well as their knowledge of God and God’s ways; this service of the heart contributes to the ongoing processes of education, training, and search for truth that are essential to the fullest human development (“perfection”) of intellectual and devotional love of God.²⁴ For Naḥmanides, rabbinically ordained daily prayer expresses the mutual relation of *hesed*, voluntarily offered lovingkindness,

22 See Soloveitchik, “Reflections on the *Amidah*,” 175.

23 Chavel, *The Commandments*, 70–71 (no. 59); Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot ta’anuyot* 1:1–3.

24 On the key passage in Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed* III:51, see Chavel, *The Commandments*, 16 (no. 10); David Silverberg, “*Mitzvat Asei 5: Prayer*,” 6–7, Maimonides Heritage Center, <https://www.mhcn.org/pdf/mitzvatasei5.pdf>; David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York: Free Press; London: Collier

through which God and humans affect each other in a complex, interconnected causal web; the quintessential mode of prayer—crying out when in distress—is less an obligation than an expression of belief in that relationship and in God’s saving role.²⁵

Soloveitchik averred that the divergent views of Maimonides and Nahmanides on daily prayer could be reconciled because both recognized the Torah commandment to cry out to God in situations of extreme distress. Both agreed on prayer out of need, but they disagreed on the “substance of the experience of *tzarah* itself”:²⁶ Nahmanides saw need as “disaster, catastrophe which comes from time to time, but it’s not permanent,” while Maimonides felt that “man is always in distress, always in need, so there is always a place for prayer.”²⁷ Nahmanides’s cry in the face of occasional disasters became Soloveitchik’s “surface crisis.” Prayer in response to collective surface crises forges “communities of the suffering and distressed . . . [and] a sense of fellowship in prayer and *tzarah*.”²⁸ Maimonides’s daily service of the heart became Soloveitchik’s “depth crisis,” the personal, existential, metaphysical distress that a thinking person feels every day, as one faces the “strangeness” and “absurd[ity]” of human existence: “Man is always in need because he is always in crisis and distress. . . . Somehow, every human being, great or small, however successful and outstanding, loses every day afresh his ontic fulcrum (the equilibrium of his being), which he tries steadily to recover.” It is from those depths that the “individual . . . calls upon God in seclusion and loneliness” and seeks “a fellowship consisting of God and man.” Soloveitchik did not always make the equation explicit—between surface crisis and Nahmanides, and between depth crisis and Maimonides—but he made the association sufficiently clear that it has become generally understood as his view of the matter.²⁹ For Soloveitchik, it made sense that Nahmanides did not consider daily prayer

Macmillan, 1985), 321–322 n. 16; and Ehud Z. Benor, “Petition and Contemplation in Maimonides’ Conception of Prayer,” *Religion* 24, no. 1 (1994): 59–66.

- 25 For emphasis on the *belief* that God hears and answers our prayer, see Lawrence Kaplan, “Human Initiative and Divine Presence,” in *From Passover 2020 to Passover 2021: Parashah Essays for a Plague Year*, vol. 2, *Parashat Terumah: Shabbat Zakhor*, February 19, 2021 (available on Kaplan’s Facebook page).
- 26 Soloveitchik, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 30.
- 27 Idem, “Philosophy and Origin of Prayer—Part 2” (starting at approx. 2:05).
- 28 The quotations in the remainder of this paragraph are from idem, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 31–35. Compare idem, “The Crisis of Human Finitude,” 162–166; and idem, “Prayer as Dialogue,” 85–87.
- 29 See, for example, Lichtenstein, Schwartz, and Kaplan cited above, n. 17, as well as Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Blessings and Thanksgiving: Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue*, ed. Shalom Carmy and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: OU Press; New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2019), xvii–xx, and Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B.*

as biblically mandated because he saw “surface crises” occurring only intermittently and not daily, while Maimonides considered daily prayer as biblically mandated because he saw a chronic, perpetual “depth crisis” every single day.

Soloveitchik was inspired by both thinkers. His definition of “surface crisis” as external, collective, and intermittent clearly draws on Nahmanides’s concept of prayer as an occasional distress cry, while his definition of “depth crisis” as constant, daily, and existential clearly draws on Maimonides’s concept of prayer as a daily Torah obligation. Soloveitchik’s very emphasis on crisis shows his indebtedness to Nahmanides, while his attention to daily practice shows his fealty to Maimonides.³⁰ Through an existentialist reading of Maimonides, he grounds the Nahmanidean theme of distress in the everyday life of every individual and not only in exceptional collective calamity. Soloveitchik interprets Maimonides’s view of Torah-commanded daily prayer as a statement not only about sources and proof-texts but, significantly, about the human condition itself. In effect, Soloveitchik reconciled and synthesized Maimonides’s and Nahmanides’s views on prayer.

During the early, dark months of COVID, I was struck by the leitmotif of need and crisis—as well as the existentialist tone—in Soloveitchik’s approach to prayer, Maimonides, and Nahmanides. I soon discovered that others had recognized the existentialist turn in his interpretation: Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein called it “daring,” while Lawrence Kaplan, “with the greatest respect,” saw it as “inspired *derush*, which, however, does not correctly represent the plain halakhic meaning of either view.” David Shatz wondered whether Soloveitchik himself conceived his interpretation of the halakhic disagreement as *peshat* or *derash*.³¹

During COVID, I was gripped by Soloveitchik’s creative interpretation of surface and depth crises. Crisis was upon the whole world, and we ourselves were in crisis. As a collectivity we were suddenly beset by a “surface crisis,” but as individuals we lived it as a “depth crisis.” To be plagued by a relentless pandemic

Soloveitchik (Jerusalem: Urim Publications; Brookline, MA: Maimonides School, 2012), 225.

- 30 See his strong bond with Maimonides since childhood in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And from There You Shall Seek*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2008), 143–146.
- 31 Lichtenstein, “Prayer in the Teachings”; Kaplan, “Human Initiative and Divine Presence,” n. 4; David Shatz, “Contemporary Scholarship on Rabbi Soloveitchik’s Thought: Where We Are, Where We Can Go,” in *Scholarly Man of Faith: Studies in the Thought and Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Dov Schwartz (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2018), 162–166. See also Christian M. Rutishauser, *The Human Condition and the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2013), 193–195, and Hartman, *A Living Covenant*, 321–322.

was shocking to us moderns, normally so confident of medicine, science, and technology. This strange and frightening collective illness did not remain intermittent, external, or superficial; rather, it became a persistent, unremitting crisis that afflicted our entire being and struck at our very core. We experienced a new existential crisis every moment of every day—surely a daily “depth crisis,” if ever there were one. Paradoxically, though more aware than ever before of the interdependence of all human organisms, each person felt lonely and solitary—physically, literally, spiritually, metaphorically, existentially.

In our COVID distress, I think that surface and depth dimensions became completely intertwined, and the very distinction between surface and depth crisis disappeared. And yet, I found these categories themselves helpful in facing our novel predicament and recognition of their coalescence somehow consoling.

For me, the interrelation of surface and depth crises is also illustrated by Maimonides’s concepts “welfare of the body” and “welfare of the soul,” his famous formulation of the purposes of the commandments.³² In Soloveitchik’s description of the Nahmanidean surface crisis, I hear echoes of Maimonides’s “welfare of the body”—the physical, material, and moral requisites of well-being. When Soloveitchik writes of aware individuals plumbing the depth crisis in order to reach spiritual insight, I hear echoes of Maimonides’s “welfare of the soul”—which is individual, spiritual, and intellectual. For Maimonides, welfare of the body, both individual and social, is a prerequisite for the ultimate welfare of the soul. During COVID, we could understand just how inextricably body and soul, or surface and depth, are linked. Without welfare of the body, how could we have welfare of the soul? How could our souls find peace when our collective social body was so afflicted and our individual bodies at mortal risk?

In COVID times, the collective and the individual planes of existence merged; it no longer made sense to maintain separate categories for them. By definition, a pandemic affects the entire collective and potentially the body of each individual person. Alone and housebound, each felt the need to express the individual fear and dread caused by the collective crisis. Maimonides’s commandment no. 59 to “blow with trumpets in times of trouble and misfortune,” though originally referring to the ancient Temple priests, seemed very relevant to people in COVID home lockdown. We wished to cry out with our own voices, to sound the trumpet, for the collective crisis that potentially threatened each and every one of us.

In our early COVID plight of isolation, existential loneliness, and mortal fear, Soloveitchik’s emphases on crisis, supplication, and dependence struck home:

32 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:27.

“If the mind is not haunted by anxiety, not plagued by *tzarah*, narrowness and constriction, if neither fear nor forlornness assault the mind, then prayer is a futile gesture.”³³ As Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, grandson of Soloveitchik, put it in late March 2020 regarding the recitation of *Avinu malkenu* and *Tahanun*: “If in times like this we don’t cry out to the *KBH* [Holy One, blessed be He], then when should we do so?”³⁴

From Loneliness to Virtual Covenantal Community

During the first COVID months, our worlds were severely contracted, whether we were in home lockdown or still engaged in essential services. Displaced from our normal shared spaces, cut off substantially or entirely from social contact with people beyond our households, we were in exile.³⁵ Our perception of space was “disjointed” as we now inhabited a liminal space, betwixt and between, located somewhere between our actual physical homes and our former—now inaccessible—social and public venues.³⁶ We were also suspended temporally, between our habits and memories of pre-pandemic times, our fraught present of uncertain duration, and the frightening, unknown future. In our homes, we felt neither at ease nor at home. Trapped in our houses and in the present, we were isolated, anxious, fearful, existentially lonely, and radically alone.

In this situation, Soloveitchik’s concepts “the lonely man of faith” and the “covenantal community” took on new meaning. In his classic essay “The Lonely Man of Faith,” Soloveitchik explicated the two Genesis accounts of the creation of humanity by presenting two ideal types: the majestic Adam I, creative, dynamic, and confident, who likes to ask “how?” and is charged with responsibility for mastering the world of nature; and, in contrast, the humble Adam II, subdued, receptive, and existentially needy, who tends to ask “why” and never forgets that

33 Soloveitchik, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 29.

34 Shlomo Zuckier, “The Pandemic Theology Dilemma: Preserve Normalcy or Embrace Crisis?,” *The Lehrhaus*, May 10, 2021, <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/the-pandemic-theology-dilemma-preserve-normalcy-or-embrace-crisis/>. As noted by Zuckier, Lichtenstein’s response to the pandemic drew upon Soloveitchik’s views, including his “theological and halakhic reading of the Rambam and Ramban.”

35 See, for example, “The 2021 Richard Kaufman Virtual Seminar: Topographies of Exile: Horizons of Hope and Healing,” *The Global Lehrhaus*, <https://thelehrhaus.org/topographies-home>.

36 For “disjointed” and “liminality” to describe our COVID situation, I thank my student Eliza Menzel. Liminality derives from the works of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.

he is just a handful of dust. Each experiences the world differently and has different needs for community. Adam II, the “lonely individual,” cries out to God from the depths of crisis and failure, seeking to overcome “his aloneness and only-ness . . . his loneliness and insecurity.”³⁷ Elsewhere, Soloveitchik used the language of exile to describe human loneliness: “First, man is in exile. Man is a homeless being. Second, exiled man, or homeless man, must pray . . . through prayer he redeems himself from his loneliness.”³⁸ We, the COVID housebound, were not literally homeless, but we were in exile, radically lonely, and homeless in a broader spiritual or metaphysical sense, cast down in our COVID depth crisis.

“Only the lonely pray, only in distress. . . .”³⁹ Adam II, the lonely man of faith, desperately seeking relationship, cries out his frailty, vulnerability, and dependence—to God and with other humans. The “quest is for a new kind of fellowship which one finds in the existential community. . . . There, one hears . . . the rhythmic beat of hearts starved for existential companionship and all-embracing sympathy. . . . There, one lonely soul finds another soul tormented by loneliness and solitude . . . [and] a community of commitments born in distress and defeat” is forged.⁴⁰ The existential, prayerful, covenantal community developed by Adam II is founded on “human solidarity and sympathy or the covenantal awareness of existential togetherness, of sharing and experiencing . . . travail and suffering. . . . Only Adam the second knows the art of praying since he confronts God with the petition of the many . . . [and discovers] the great covenantal experience of being together, praying together and for one another.”⁴¹ Indeed, in COVID times, we felt that all of humanity was presenting one petition to God, the ultimate Source, for relief, health, and life itself.

Soloveitchik claimed that the new covenantal community comprises not only humans praying together but also God, “the He in whom all being is rooted and in whom everything finds its rehabilitation and, consequently, redemption.”⁴² As God brings together Adam and Eve in sympathy and friendship, so does a praying, covenantal community become “a community of friends” that relieves individuals of their “loneliness and isolation. . . . Covenantal man . . . is thus

37 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” *Tradition* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1965): 25. See also Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 121–146.

38 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Synagogue as an Institution and as an Idea,” in idem, *Blessings and Thanksgiving: Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue*, ed. Shalom Carmy and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: OU Press; New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2019), 166.

39 Idem, “Religious Definitions of Man” (starting at approx. 60:00).

40 Idem, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” 28.

41 *Ibid.*, 37–38; see also *ibid.*, 34–43, 45–48.

42 *Ibid.*, 28.

redeemed from his agonizing solitude.”⁴³ In the covenantal community, Jews transcend individual loneliness by reaching out through the time-honored liturgy retrospectively and prospectively to the entire Jewish collectivity, re-experiencing its “rendezvous with God” and the vision of the covenant in “memory, actuality and anticipatory tension.”⁴⁴

Jews praying online during COVID created a new form of fellowship to express shared longings for human solidarity and for some kind of redemption. I contend that through virtual means, Jews forged an existential, prayerful, covenantal community in the here and now of the pandemic crisis. While acutely aware of absence and physical distance, we generated others’ presence through telephone and screen. Though in normal times Skype or Zoom may have seemed poor, inadequate substitutes for in-person contact, in COVID times we grasped the positive potential of these media: they were the alternative to dangerous physical contact or to *no contact with others at all*. Gratefully, we realized that *physical distancing* did not have to mean *social distancing* altogether.⁴⁵ Digital technology allowed physically distant people to encounter one another in a shared Zoom room with surprising ease and immediacy and to develop a sense of community then and there. Thus, in Soloveitchik’s terms, Adam II—the lonely spiritual seeker mired in a depth crisis—benefits from the intellectual prowess and worldly mastery of Adam I, the creative inventor and producer of technology.

Moreover, Jews praying together online also drew upon vital cultural and spiritual resources—the practices and words of traditional prayer—to go beyond the present moment, to feel bound together with other praying communities of Jews past and present, across space and time. In COVID times, lonely and vulnerable Jews managed to find and forge covenantal community through virtual means. The dependent cry of pain and the desperate yearning for connection and community—these were the *kavvanah* of the COVID moment.

Keva, Kavvanah, and COVID

To understand how home-based, online prayer gatherings helped meet our acute need for company, we must reconsider *keva* in classical sources and in our lonely COVID isolation. We may better appreciate *keva* if we construe it broadly

43 Ibid., 45.

44 Ibid., 46–47.

45 See Benjamin Braude, “Physical Distancing Lessons from a Monk and a Rabbi,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/coronavirus/physical-distancing-lessons-monk-and-rabbi>.

as order, regularity, and structured liturgy, rather than dismiss it as rigid, rote, or perfunctory performance of duties.

Rabbinic sources provide two justifications for the prescribed daily recitation of the statutory *amidah* prayer in the morning, afternoon, and evening: one based on the daily sacrifices offered in the Temple and the other on the outpourings of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to God in their respective hours of need (b. *Berakhot* 26b). The formulation that “the prayers were instituted by the patriarchs and the sages based them on the Temple offerings” reconciles *kavvanah*, the patriarchs’ personal prayers, with *keva*, the Temple offerings.

Overall, it is important to recite the authorized words of the set prayers properly rather than cause confusion through improvisation or novelty (b. *Berakhot* 29b). Yet, the right words—albeit necessary—are not by themselves sufficient: the definition of prayer as “service of the heart” (b. *Ta’anit* 2a) implies that *kavvanah* is essential.

The *loci classici* for the insufficiency of *keva* and the need for *kavvanah* present a stark opposition between fixed prayer and supplication: “Do not make your prayer *keva*, but a plea for mercy and an entreaty before God” (m. *Avot* 2:13), for “one whose prayer is *keva*—his prayer is not supplication” (m. *Berakhot* 4:4). *Keva* could mean a prayer experienced as a burden, or not offered in the language of supplication, or lacking a novel element. In any case, the warning is clear: do not make your prayer merely routine, rote, or perfunctory, recited from a sense of duty or obligation; rather, make it a sincere, heartfelt entreaty to God for mercy or compassion. The ideal prayer requires both *keva* and *kavvanah*: the prescribed words of the fixed liturgy, properly enunciated and articulated, expressed as a plea for help arising from one’s unique situation and genuine sense of need. In other words, without sincere intention or emotion, one’s prayer may correspond to the set times of the Temple sacrifices but not to the patriarchs’ voluntary prayers.

The exquisite balance between *keva* and *kavvanah* was expressed eloquently by Maimonides, theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), and Soloveitchik. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides provided a historical reason for the formulation of a set liturgy: to combat the terrible confusion and degradation of language caused by exile, the orderly form of the liturgy provided everyone with a fitting, perfect, and eloquent style of prayer (*Hilkhot tefillah u-birkat kohanim* 1:4). And yet, he averred that *kavvanah* is essential: “Any prayer recited without correct intention [*kavvanah*] is not prayer. One who prays without correct intention must pray again with correct intention.”⁴⁶

46 Kellner, *The Code of Maimonides*, 28–29 (*Hilkhot tefillah u-birkat kohanim* 4:15). Moses Hyamson translates *kavvanah* as “concentration of the mind” and “mental concentration,”

Heschel explained *keva* and *kavvanah* very clearly: “Jewish prayer is guided by two opposite principles: order and outburst, regularity and spontaneity, uniformity and individuality, law and freedom.” He expressed gratitude for the obligation to pray the fixed liturgy at set times, for he admitted that law and duty saved him in those moments when he did not feel the inclination to pray. Further, he exclaimed that the familiar words of the fixed liturgy provided the avenue for deep spiritual engagement: “How much guidance, how many ultimate insights are found in the Siddur.”⁴⁷

Soloveitchik, too, gave both *keva* and *kavvanah* their due. While everyone recites the same *amidah*, each person’s “service of the heart” is a “distinct . . . intimate, individualized, unique experience. . . .”⁴⁸ *Kavvanah* is supremely important, for prayer is one of the few commandments that requires inner intention as well as outward action:⁴⁹ “The *act* (ma’aseh) of prayer is formal, the recitation of a known, set text; but the *fulfillment* of prayer, its *kiyyum*, is subjective: it is the service of the heart. . . . *Kavvanah* is the essence and substance: prayer without intention is nothing.” In a passionate and existentialist vein, he went further:

When Rambam said that prayer is Biblically ordained and identical with the service of the heart, he thereby redeemed love, fear, and indeed our entire religious life from muteness. They were given a voice. The lover expresses his yearning, the trembler his fear, the wretched and dejected his helplessness, the perplexed his confusion, and the joyful his religious song—all within the framework of prayer. The service of the heart gained a foothold in the world of forms and facts. Experience and prayer constitute two poles between which the great service of God oscillates.⁵⁰

With *keva* thus encoded as “prayer” and *kavvanah* as “experience,” Soloveitchik claimed that the statutory prayers can express the experiences and emotions of

in *Mishneh Torah: The Book of Adoration by Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Boys Town Jerusalem Publishers, 1965), 102b.

47 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 111, 130–131.

48 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Old Prayers and ‘New’ Jews,” in idem, *Blessings and Thanksgiving: Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue*, ed. Shalom Carmy and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: OU Press; New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2019), 186.

49 Idem, “Prayer, Petition and Crisis,” 15–19; and idem, “Intention (*Kavvanah*) in Reading *Shema* and in Prayer,” in idem, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2003), 87–88.

50 Idem, “Reflections on the *Amidah*,” 147.

real life. If fixed prayer be infused with the individual's true service of the heart, then "prayer is not marked by monotonous uniformity. It is multi-colored: it contains contradictory themes, expresses a variety of moods, conflicting experiences, and desires oscillating in opposing directions. . . . Prayer . . . leaps and cascades from wondrous heights to terrifying depths, and back."⁵¹ When individuals—particularly "in crisis or in need"—explore their innermost depths through the fixed words of the liturgy, communal prayer can become "a personal experience . . . a creative gesture."⁵² The set prayers thus supply language for one's emotions and needs, transforming the mute or inchoate *ze'akah* (cry) of the individual into the *tefillah* of the community.

Thus, Heschel and Soloveitchik masterfully balanced *keva* and *kavvanah*, duty and meaning, *halakhah* and *aggadah*. Both claimed, from experience, that reciting the powerful, evocative words of the traditional liturgy with intention can be a deeply spiritual, authentic, and creative experience for the individual.⁵³ *Keva* and *kavvanah* need not be opposed but can work in tandem: fixed prayer channels experience, while experience infuses prayer with urgent, individualized meaning.

This powerful fusion was brought home during our COVID depths. I came to appreciate just how much *keva* could satisfy "the vital need to pray."⁵⁴ In the chaotic darkness of our COVID isolation and loneliness, we craved order, structure, and company as vital, fundamental needs. Our yearning, our *kavvanah*, was precisely for *keva* and community.

The words of the fixed liturgy, as well as the set times, physical gestures, and other practices of communal prayer, provided order and structure. They offered an antidote of normalcy to our ruptured routines and mortal fear, indeed, an "anchor, a ballast, something to grasp and hold tight."⁵⁵

The fundamental, weighty words of traditional prayers carried our deeper-than-ever fears, our hopes for health and strength, our very need to cry out our dependence, and our yearning to be heard. With COVID insistently exposing

51 Ibid., 148; see also idem, "Jews at Prayer," in *Shiurei HaRav: A Conspectus of the Public Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Joseph Epstein (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1994), 82–85.

52 Idem, "The Crisis of Human Finitude," 161; see also idem, "Prayer, Petition and Crisis," 20–21.

53 Idem, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," 66–68.

54 Eliezer Finkelman, "A Meditation on Petitionary Prayer and Natural Yearning," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 17 (2016–2017): 136 n. 30. I see a closer connection than he between statutory prayer and satisfying the need to pray.

55 Personal communications, June 17 and 26, 2022, from Carol Papper, who attended the virtual pandemic services of Congregation Rodeph Sholom, NY, led by Rabbi Benjamin Spratt.

our existential vulnerability, we felt new fears and new needs. Still, we discovered that we could find and express our needy selves through the fixed, traditional words of our forebears' prayers, some of which now touched and penetrated us in new ways. We realized that despite all the advances of modern technology, science, and medicine, we were suddenly—like they—subject to terrifying forces much larger than ourselves, yet in our case also invisible and infinitesimal.

The traditional words and melodies themselves became one's regular, intimate companions. Thus, the liturgy served as a source of company, a channel for expression, a communal container for overpowering individual emotion. As experience and text met, the *kavvanah* of individual, collective, and global crisis suffused, intensified, and transformed the *keva* of the liturgy. As Soloveitchik taught, set prayer can be creative if animated by personal experience; *keva* and *kavvanah* can merge if one prays with authentic humility, vulnerability, and urgency in a moment of need.

Praying online with the same people regularly and attentively—especially when seeing faces in Zoom's "gallery" view—offered a meaningful kind of presence in the midst of our painful physical absence. Voicing the same words, standing, facing eastwards, and responding "amen"—all in unison—these practices helped forge fellowship and a sense of common purpose, no matter others' physical locations and whether they were old or recent acquaintances. This repeated Zoom or livestream experience could lead to surprisingly strong bonds among participants. Adapting Soloveitchik's terms, I contend that a remote, onscreen COVID gathering forged a "prayerful community" of the type sought by lonely Adam II and was an instantiation of the "covenantal community," of *kelal Yisra'el* as Soloveitchik claimed about every (in-person) *minyán*.⁵⁶ Praying communally from inside our own private homes kept us company and consoled us in our own solitude. The fellowship with other Jews and their prayers provided isolated, atomized individuals with a sense of connection to a larger whole: to today's *kelal Yisra'el* extending beyond the local to the metropole, to the national and global, as well as to a deeper sense of kinship with past generations.⁵⁷

Scholars often focus upon the fixed, repeated, "canonical" aspects of rituals. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff observed that "the morphological characteristics of ritual as a medium—precision, accuracy, predictability, formality, and repetition" serve an "ordering function" and that "ritual always delivers a message

56 See Soloveitchik, "The Synagogue as an Institution," 179; idem, "The Community," *Tradition* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 19–22.

57 For example, Rabbi Spratt cited *conversos'* home practices; personal communication, June 17, 2022, from Carol Papper.

about continuity.”⁵⁸ Indeed, in our COVID plight, *keva* proved more valuable to us than individual, spontaneous expression because it offered historical continuity, a collective framing, and community and company in the moment. Even via the new digital medium, the *keva* of Jewish prayers and practices was strong enough to bind us together in a virtual covenantal community, both historic and contemporary. Further, sites like YouTube allowed viewers to “*shul-hop*,” to see varied worship services in multiple locations.

It may seem strange that an enhanced sense of *kelal Yisra’el* was attainable through ritual enactment on small screens using home electronic devices. To understand this, it is useful to focus on the modalities of screen and home.

As any participant in an online seminar knows, the digital revolution has transformed our sense of distance. During online COVID *minyanim*, our Zoom screens not only brought far-away faces near to us but also sometimes allowed for greater *kavvanah* than we sometimes experience in the synagogue, where chatting with neighbors is a tempting distraction. A quiet home space designated for virtual prayer could also enhance focus. Indeed, I myself—and I have heard this from others, too—had seldom focused so intently on the words and melodies themselves, on the *experience* of prayer, as I did during these virtual services. Solitude could mean less distraction and deeper interiority; paradoxically, distance could enhance immediacy.

Surprisingly, the close-ups of people’s faces produced a strange kind of intimacy, that of film rather than theater. In film, one sees faces up close, magnified, brought right before the viewer’s eyes, whereas in theater, one needs to be in the front rows, in physical proximity, to feel close. Of course, no one would claim that film and electronic closeness are the same as physical closeness. Yet, faces appearing on one’s computer screen can produce a sense of personal closeness. Intimacy was heightened when, in the depths of COVID, clergy communicated with *everyone* through their screens, with no in-person or hybrid options possible.

As our activities in the outside social world were reduced, we necessarily focused inward—inward to our homes and inward on the spiritual.

Exiled from synagogue, one could turn one’s own intimate home into a *mikdash me’at*, a small sanctuary. In place of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem, rabbinic Judaism has long viewed the home table as a site for worship and

58 Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Dutton, 1978), 86. See also Roy A. Rappaport, “The Obvious Aspects of Ritual,” in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 427–434; and Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

atonement for transgressions if accompanied by kosher food, Torah table talk, praise of God, and hospitality to needy guests (m. *Avot* 3:3; b. *Berakhot* 55a). Now, too, the home, one's prayer corner, and one's screen functioned as a *mikdash me'at*.

Let us recall that one time-honored way of sanctifying a Jewish home is to place a *mezuzah* on the doorframe (Deut. 6:9, 11:20). The blessing uses the verb *li-keboa* (to affix), which has the same root as *keva*.⁵⁹ The words of Torah inside a *mezuzah* are meant to provide a reminder of Torah and, in some sense, assurance and protection to a Jewish home. Similarly, the set words of the statutory Jewish prayers affix a person to Torah and community. To affix the *mezuzah* or to recite the fixed words of prayer in a gathering from home—both are ways of creating a *mikdash me'at*.

In our COVID home sanctuaries, we were necessarily absent physically from one another. Yet, we could be present virtually and spiritually for one another—through the miracle of technology, the intimacy of our homes, the immediacy of faces onscreen, and the supreme act of imagination, spirit, and *kavvanah* to be part of a virtual covenantal community. Perhaps our pressing physical worries—the “surface crisis”—made it all the more necessary to focus inward, on the spiritual, on our “depth crisis” needs. Liturgy, prayer, and community could provide something to grasp that evoked longer-lived realities and meanings. As the physically social receded in our daily experience, these deeper dimensions became more important. Our “surface” needs brought us to our “depth” needs. Frightened by the fleeting and transitory, we thirsted for something more enduring.

Within our homes, we adapted our traditional prayers and rituals for onscreen enactment. Who will forget our creative Passover Seders and High Holiday observances in 2020? It took daring faith and *kavvanah* for clergy to lead virtual services for remote congregants and for all participants to assert and find spiritual fellowship and community.

To express that strange and novel quest, Rabbi Naomi Levy composed a prayer in the early days of the pandemic:

We miss our sanctuary / The comfort of community / Our voices
 joined together in prayer, / But for heaven's sake / We pray from
 home / As one. . . / For this is God's prayer: / Be safe my chil-
 dren . . . / Your touch . . . / Your breath . . . / Can cost lives right
 now. . . / So reach out with all your heart / Join soul to soul /

59 Personal communications, June 2021, from Rabbi James Ponet and Elana Ponet.

With a mighty love / That transcends all distance. . . / We pray
from home / As One / And God says, / Amen.⁶⁰

In exile from our synagogues, we prayed from our home sanctuaries. We drew on the strength of the covenantal community as we found company and consolation through our liturgy and our fellow Jews praying, near and far, past and present.

Soloveitchik defined the synagogue institutionally as a house of prayer, but symbolically as a “home of prayer.” As a home of prayer, the synagogue is “the home of man, of homeless man, which is at the same time the home of God . . . [where] God comes . . . to keep His appointment with man.” Though that home is normally a synagogue, a person may “have a rendezvous” with God “anywhere on the globe.” For Soloveitchik, “to pray means to return home.”⁶¹ In the nineteenth century, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch had bemoaned the emphasis of many modern Jews on attending Sabbath services in the synagogue to the neglect of daily Jewish practice in the home.⁶² During COVID, our homes had to substitute for our synagogues and to become veritable “home[s] of prayer.” Physically in our literal houses, we willed ourselves symbolically to be in homes of prayer. Each participant did so from a palpable sense of need born of the unique COVID moment and with acute desire and sincere intention. In reciting, pondering, and being accompanied by the set words of the liturgy, COVID-daveners felt a new relationship emerge between the texts and their own needs and intentions, in other words, between *zorekh*, *kavvanah*, and *keva*.

Conclusion

In shock and in exile from our normal lives, we experienced the first months of COVID as one all-encompassing surface-and-depth crisis. *Zorekh*, *kavvanah*, and *keva* fused into a new triad. As we were gripped by fear because our normal lives had become upended, unfixed, and unpredictable, our authentic need—our acute desire—was for order and fixity. In this hour of need, I found Soloveitchik’s concepts of needy petitionary prayer born of surface and depth crises evocative and consoling. In COVID extremis, Nahmanides’s cry of

60 Naomi Levy, “For Heaven’s Sake We Pray from Home as One: A Prayer for Patience and Restraint,” Rabbinical Assembly, April 24, 2020, <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/PrayFromHomeNaomiLevy.pdf>.

61 Soloveitchik, “The Synagogue as an Institution,” 173–174.

62 See Braude, “Physical Distancing Lessons.”

distress and Maimonides's daily urgency of prayer merged seamlessly. We no longer distinguished between prayer in conditions of normalcy (*Berakhot*) and prayer in conditions of crisis (*Ta'anit*). Further, several customary boundaries now seemed merely conventional and situational: we had to redraw the boundaries between surface and depth, *keva* and *kavvanah*, external and internal, self and others, and, no less, between the physical and spiritual, physical and digital, absence and presence.

Assaulted by unbridled nature, we deployed the resources of culture—of spirit, religion, and tradition—as we made ingenious use of digital technology. Thus, Adam I helped comfort and fortify Adam II. We saw that we could exist, and even find meaning, in novel digital spaces. Virtual prayer services took us out of our isolated physical locations, placed us onscreen in the presence of others, and gave us a collective identity—not only as a COVID-stricken species but as a praying community, a representative and instantiation of the covenantal community, whose practice, ethos, and culture allowed us to stand steady on a sturdy continuum despite our being in exile and in a precarious liminal state.

Feeling both radically alone and acutely interdependent, we poured out our stricken, “downtrodden . . . lonely” selves into the liturgy.⁶³ Reciting the fixed liturgy in the sacred fellowship of virtual community allowed us to go beyond Nahmanides's distress call, beyond wordless cry (Maimonides's commandment no. 59), to meaningful daily prayer (Maimonides's commandment no. 5). Soloveitchik explained further: only from a sense of utter crisis, hopelessness, and dependence on nothing but God does true prayer become possible and fixed prayer become authentic and creative. In the *amidah*, desperate need and petition are woven together dialectically with praise, thanksgiving, and faith in eventual redemption.⁶⁴

Ritual theorists express it differently: rituals, through invocation of enduring truths and values, often address the contradictions between the real and the ideal. Tom Driver, for example, asserts that ritual can effect real change in the

63 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Grant Us Understanding to Know Your Ways,” in idem, *Blessings and Thanksgiving: Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue*, ed. Shalom Carmy and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: OU Press; New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2019), 102; see also idem, *Chumash Mesoras Harav: Sefer Devarim*, ed. Arnold Lustiger (New York: OU Press; Edison, NJ: Ohr Publishing, 2018), 26–27.

64 Idem, “Man Is Vulnerable,” in Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979), 49.

world by helping people imagine a different reality and by asserting that through enactment transformation is possible.⁶⁵

Our pandemic virtual services faced the gap between the new COVID reality and the ideal of pre- and post-pandemic times. Our services made powerful claims, demonstrating palpably that many Jews wanted to continue praying together, in whatever way they could; that they wanted the company of other Jews and of the tradition; that pouring out their hearts and minds to God through the set liturgy enhanced their sense of well-being and meaning at a time of loss and feeling so fatefully adrift. Participating in such services indicated that moral and spiritual strength were still possible and that spirit could somehow triumph over material limitations and physical distance.

Gathering online to pray the statutory services offered order and structure, connection and community, solace and resilience. To many, the *keva* of virtual services and the *kavvanah* driving them became vital lifelines—of company, sustenance, and hope—that helped assuage our utter existential loneliness. The covenantal community and its liturgy, the Jewish tradition and its worthies, kept us company and strengthened us in our home sanctuaries as we shared our pain and suffering in virtual communal prayer. Like Adam I, we witnessed the invaluable resources (and also the limits) of human ingenuity and creativity, in medicine, science, and technology. Digital prayer expresses the will and the ability of the collective human spirit to try our best—like Adam II—to muddle through, prevail, and sustain hope.⁶⁶ Virtual communal prayer during the pandemic helped provide *zedah la-derekh*, provisions for our long and difficult, crisis-ridden journey.

65 Tom F. Driver, “Transformation: The Magic of Ritual,” in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 170–187. See also Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 473–483, and Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*.

66 On history and ritual as different means to sustain hope and “assuage our loneliness,” see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “Toward a History of Jewish Hope,” in *The Faith of Fallen Jews: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History*, ed. David N. Myers and Alexander Kaye (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014), 315; and idem, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996). On hope throughout Yerushalmi’s works, see Lois C. Dubin, “Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, the Royal Alliance, and Jewish Political Theory,” *Jewish History* 28, no. 1 (2014): 51–81.