‘The Intellect is the Bond Between Us and Him’: Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Divine Names and Communion with God through the Intellect

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The purpose of philosophy is to know the Creator, for He is the real God (...) but the fruit of philosophy and the result of it is to imitate His acts according to one’s ability.

The present essay is an analysis of some of the main features in the thought of Joseph B. Soloveitchik as articulated in “U-viqqashtem mi-sham”. The essay will bring into focus, first of all, Soloveitchik’s interpretation of the divine names ‘I am that I am’ and the tetragrammaton. Secondly, the essay will examine Soloveitchik’s statement that communion with God is achieved through the intellect.


Soloveitchik’s discussion of the divine names ‘I am that I am’ and the tetragrammaton is articulated in the context of his exposition of the doubly dual nature of the relationship between God and man. According to this exposition, man, on the one hand, is in search of God and, on the other, hides from Him at the moment the divine reveals Himself. And God, for His part, both reveals Himself to man and conceals Himself from him; He is in search of man, the apple of His eye, and yet there are times in which He “wraps Himself in a cloud and withdraws in the hidden places of eternity.”

The duality in man’s relationship with the divine is related to what Soloveitchik calls two types of consciousness, “natural” and “revelational”. Man’s “natural consciousness” is described by Soloveitchik in various ways which do not seem entirely coherent. Man’s natural consciousness is characterized, first of all, by the endeavour to direct the multiplicity of reality and its contingent nature to a first being that is unconditioned and exists of necessity. To illustrate this endeavour, Soloveitchik refers to the first rule in Maimonides’ Mekhane Tora, Hilchot Yesode ha-Tora I, 1. There it is stated that the first principle of wisdom is the acknowledgement of a first being whose existence is the precondition for the existence of all that exists. A second way in which Soloveitchik describes this type of consciousness is by the endeavour of man to find “the concealed reason” that will enlighten the core of reality. Both endeavours are considered by Soloveitchik to be attempts to know the divine through knowing reality. And thirdly and finally, there is the awareness in man’s natural consciousness of the enigmatic nature of reality, as the core of reality transcends the abilities of cognition. The epistemological transcendence of reality is interpreted by Soloveitchik as a hint

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4 “U-viqqashtem mi-sham” 148.

5 “U-viqqashtem mi-sham” 132–133, note 7; 140. Cf. Soloveitchik’s doctoral thesis (published under the name Josef Solowiejczyk), Das reine Denken und die Seinskonstituierung bei Hermann Cohen (Berlin, 1932) 87 et passim.