

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

In a recent letter to the editor regarding my paper "Self Effacement in the Bible" (Vol. XXXV:3, July-September 2007), Dr. Kahn asserts that I made two errors in acknowledging the possibilities in Judaism to be "part of God" and the ability of achieving "union with God." Actually, he is contesting the main ingredients of *bittul hayesh* that includes the viewpoint that man has no independent existence, and that man may attain the state of *devekut* [translated as union, attachment, or cleaving]. Yet the referenced sources indicate that our most profound thinkers have supported these ideas.

Dr. Kahn does not accept the idea intrinsic to the understanding of *bittul hayesh* of the negation of the phenomenal world; that is, that all is nullified within the word of God and that there is no existence apart from God. He overlooks quotes and references from both Soloveichik and the Tanya attesting to this idea, such as the passage quoted from Soloveichik's *Worship of the Heart* (p. 180 of my article and note 6) wherein that scholar stipulates that the definition of *ehad* of Deuteronomy 6:4 "signifies that only God exists; nothing else beside him and besides him" and that "*ehad* means the negation of the ontic autonomy of finite creation separated from God." He rejected the words of his teacher who said: "There is only one form of reality, God. He and Being are identical. Creation is the inclusion of other finite substances into the Divine Being. The world, the real and the ideal, the concrete and the transcendental exist in him."

Nor did Dr. Kahn consider my reference to the Tanya, chapter 43, note 5 (upon which my formulation of *bittul hayesh* is basically predicated), wherein the Tanya writes that all creation is nullified in reality within the word of God, and admonishes that "man may not regard himself as an exception to this principle, for his body, and *nefesh* and *ruach* and *neshamah* are nullified in reality in the word of God." Indeed, the Tanya adds that the opposite of holiness is the *sitra ahra* [other side] or the *kelipah* [shell], which supports selfishness and independence (p.79.); and "that which does not surrender itself to God, but is a separate thing by itself, does not receive its vitality from the holiness of the Holy One, blessed be He..." (p. 23.)

As *bittul* implies nonexistence apart from God, we may infer that King David, who, according to the Malbim on II Samuel 6:14 "*bittel kevodo mipnei*

kvod hashem [effaced his honor in favor of the honor of the Lord], viewed himself as part of God; and that Michal, concerned for her own honor, *ipso facto* separated herself and viewed herself as standing apart from the Lord.

Is there really a barrier between heaven and earth? There are opinions to the contrary. Did not King David declare in Psalms 149:8, "*Im esak shamayim sham atah v'atzia sheol hinekha* [If I ascend up to heaven Thou art there; if I make my bed in sheol, behold Thou art there]." Does not Hasidism teach, "*Leit atar panui mineh* [There is no place devoid of Him]"? There is also the faith system taught by the Ba'al Shem Tov that calls for the belief in God's immanence and transcendence, and the Ba'al Shem Tov's parable of the *me-hizot* found in *Ben PoratYosef* (Lvov, 1866, p. 55). Furthermore, the Tanya emphasized that "everything one sees with one's eyes. . . constitutes the outer garments of the King" (Tanya, ch. 42, p. 225). Also, if one wants to "gladden his heart" one should seek "to understand His blessed true Unity: how He permeates all worlds, both upper and lower" (p. 149).

Soloveichik was the spiritual heir of Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin, whose *Nefesh Hahayyim* introduces one to the world of the Zohar and to the teachings of the Ari that the worlds are linked, and there is a connection to the supernal realm (reprint ed., Ohio 1997, Gate 1, esp. pages 28-29). Here one can read the famous teaching of the Zohar that "every world, both upper and lower, from the start of the most secret highest point until the last of all the levels, one is a garment for the other, this within that and that within this" (Zohar on Genesis 20a, quoted on p. 29). Or, that "the worlds are so ordered and linked, that the lower is dependant on the upper, and so on until the Almighty, blessed Be He, the soul of all." A teaching of the Zohar is that "the soul of man, planted above, passes myriads of worlds until it descends into man's body. But the most important part of the soul is attached and planted above, as if to say, part of God, and it descends as a rope until it enters the body of man." (p. 32).

Although the aggada in T.B. Succah 5a pointing to a barrier between heaven and earth seems to be consistent with the notion that *devekut* should be interpreted as a theoretical construct, there are interpretations that claim the possibility of a union. Indeed, explanations range from supporting or marrying one's daughters to Torah scholars to the lofty height of becoming a *ma'on*

[residence] or *merkavah lashekhinah* [chariot for the Shekhinah] both in body and soul.

While Rashi on Deuteronomy 11:22, quoting Sifre 48,49 deems it impossible to attach oneself to God, and while the Sforno suggests that *u'ledavkah bo* refers to the consecration of our deeds towards the fulfillment of the will of God, many other exegetes present a more esoteric and mystical approach, suggesting an actual union with God. Ibn Ezra, who generally tends towards rationalistic exegesis, writes: "*Basof. V'hu sod gadol* [At the end. And this is a great secret]." The Ramban tries to unravel this cryptic interpretation, and concludes that Ibn Ezra is actually referring to the possibility that "the men of excellence, even in their lifetime, *their souls shall be bound in the bundle of life* (I Sam. 25:29) since their very being becomes a *maon* [residence] for the Divine Glory." He claims that he too arrived at a similar interpretation in Leviticus 18:5, that some people who cleave to the Glorious Name will live forever in body and soul.

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin states that when man fulfills all the commandments he attains the state of *devekut* – a state wherein he is actually attached to God: "This is the meaning of *devekut*: Through the holiness that he receives from his deeds, he is attached to God, even in life: *But you that did cleave to the Lord are alive all of you today* (Deut. 4: 4)." His limbs "become holy from the supernal holiness," and "the glory of God always hovers over him," and "he corrects upper words and order, and he becomes with all his powers and limbs a chariot for them" (*Nesfesh Hahayyim*, pp. 40-41).

The Tanya formulated the same idea, claiming even the possibility of a "perfect union" with God: ". . . in order to draw the light and effulgence of the Shekhinah also over his body and animal soul . . . he needs to fulfill the practical commandments which are performed by the body itself. For the very energy of the body itself which is engaged in this action is absorbed in the Divine light and His will and is united with Him in perfect union Thereby also the energy of the vital spirit in the physical body . . . is actually absorbed into holiness like the divine soul itself . . . (Ch. 35, p.161). The Or Hahayyim (Rabbi Hayyim Ben Moses Attar, 1696-1743) on Deuteronomy 4:4 also agrees that the Divine name rests on the limb that performs a commandment. Since the 613 commandments correlate with the sum of our body parts, we may become *devekim*, attached or united to God.

If Soloveichik did indeed rebuke his student, perhaps he did not want these teachings to be shared by the intellectually immature. It is dangerous to enter the *pardes*. But the views with which Dr. Kahn takes issue are intrinsic to Jewish thought, albeit they may not be known or shared by many. I hope this response has amplified Dr. Kahn's perspectives on Jewish thought.

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