

LITURGICAL ETHICS IN COHEN'S RELIGION OF REASON

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Hermann Cohen's *Religion der Vernunft: Aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1919), "Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism,"¹ establishes groundbreaking ideas and methodologies such as the notion of correlation, an ethics of the other, and a scriptural hermeneutics that is both philosophical and traditionally exegetical. In addition, Cohen places liturgy at the crucial bridge points between the self and the community, the self and God, and the self and its growth into moral autonomy. I refer to this moral self as a "liturgical self." What Cohen's liturgical self explains and philosophical ethics does not, is how the individual becomes at once autonomous and moral, at once for others, for itself, and for its community. This could be described as becoming responsible for the redemption of the world.

Although Cohen is usually presented as a rational foundationalist on the model of the typical modern Enlightenment philosophers, attention to

¹ *Religion der Vernunft: Aus den Quellen des Judentum*. Leipzig: Fock, 1919. English Translation by Simon Kaplan [1972] *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*. With introductory essays by Leo Strauss, Steven S. Schwarzschild and Kenneth Seeskin. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). Abbreviated in our text as "RR."

his writings on liturgy and the dynamics of ethical self-development, reveals a striking openness to the influences of texts and liturgies as alternative “sources” of philosophical thought and ethics. This is part of Cohen’s own movement away from Kant to critical idealism, but it also involves his deep commitment to Jewish theism and Jewish scriptures.

When Cohen discusses the development of the individual as a moral I, he is arguing that the individual as a moral I is neither given by Kantian reason, nor duty, nor attitude. Cohen wants to establish that the individual as an ethical self-consciousness is never a static given, but always an ongoing project. The moral individual is an infinite task molded by a web of relations that include the “Thou” and the “We” and is ruled by the external standards of the heteronomous law. As Cohen puts this in *Religion of Reason*, “the I is a step in the ascent to the goal which is infinite” (RR, 204). Because the I is an infinite task, gained incrementally in actions and in relation to the future, it can never be given in the “empirical self.” Michael Zank, an important contemporary interpreter of Cohen, puts this well: “The ethical self-consciousness is thus distinct from an immediate or empirical sense of self. In fact, it is an act of emancipation from a natural perception of self. The latter is psychologically determined by memory and thus by the past. Ethics, however, is tied to the future. It has its mode in possibility, and the constitution of its object, action, is always a turning away from the past.”²

The moral I, for Cohen, is constantly in process because it is chasing after an infinite ideal, a messianic ideal of universal peace and justice. Because this ideal is infinite, the self can never fully live up to it. What philosophical ethics fails to provide is a mechanism to deal with the inevitable gap between the infinite requirement of the ideal and the living human person. This gap is experienced by the human being as guilt.

Each individual feels guilt in his or her unique way and this guilt is one of the defining features of human individuality. Because of this guilt, the individual can find herself in an isolation which leaves her “at wit’s

² Michael Zank, *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* (Providence RI: Brown University Press, 2000), 285.

end" (RR, 168) and therefore renders her incapable of moral action. The problem may be most severe in the case of a criminal who has been convicted of a crime and has only his punishment as solace. However, Cohen also believes that the problem can be generalized to all human beings who, by being human, are universally and necessarily faced with the ethical demands of moral action. Thus, ethics turns to religion, not out of some extra-ethical or therapeutic need to capture the concrete individual subject, but out of a need to retain its moral efficacy. "If we claim that religion is concerned with man's guilt, and if we impart to religion the origin of the I as the individual, we do not dissolve its connection with ethics, but, on the contrary, make the connection effective" (RR, 168).

The problem of moral guilt turns to religion for a solution because, as Cohen puts it, "man looks into the eyes of men; only God looks into the heart (RR, 168)." Therefore, the individual looks to God as the eye into her own soul and the source of love and forgiveness despite sin. In the case of excessive guilt from sin, it is only God who can release guilt and thereby recapture the sinner for a future moral life. "If, at this point, the correlation to God did not come into force he, [the sinner] would be absolutely lost to the moral world" (RR, 168). Yet God, in the Jewish view, does not provide release from sin through an absolute free grace. Forgiveness and restitution is offered through a process of repentance and through liturgies of atonement that constitute and restore the self as a moral I.

Cohen's solution to these problems of the I are therefore found in the notions of atonement as they are developed in the Torah by the prophets and the Rabbis. Cohen asserts that a transformation in the cult of sacrifice, initiated by the Prophet Ezekiel and then in rabbinic thought, supplies liturgies of atonement that retrieve the individual for ethics. This retrieval is won through a transformation in the institution of sacrifice that gives the individual both a sense of autonomy and moral efficaciousness. To map out this process, Cohen becomes a "textual reasoner."³ He takes us

³ For an introduction to the goals and methods of textual reasoning see Volume 1:1 of the *E-Text Journal of Textual Reasoning*. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr/vol1/iss1/>

through an interpretation of the ancient cult of sacrifice that at once preserves the old tradition and transforms it in the light of ethics. To understand the liturgies of repentance and their role in constituting the self as a moral I, we therefore need to detour into Cohen's exercise in textual reasoning.

The Retention and Transformation of the Institution of Sacrifice

In Cohen's discussion of the sacrificial cult, he acknowledges that the sacrificial cult began in paganism as an attempt to "appease" the Gods "whose hatred and envy one fears" (RR, 179). In early Israelite religion, the cult's function was to expiate collective guilt that accrued to children and the whole community on account of the sins of their parents. Cohen refers to the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel as a collective "feast for purification and purgation of sin" (RR, 216). Sacrifice is, then, a desperate attempt to deal with a predetermined collective tragic fate rather than with immoral acts of individuals.

Given this, there is a question of whether or not sacrifice is serviceable for a modern neo-Kantian ethics that is built on the free choices of autonomous selves. Yet Cohen argues that the prophets "transformed the inward meaning" of sacrifice (RR, 174). This transformation is indicative not only of the prophets' attitudes toward the "old institution" (RR, 175) of sacrifice, but of Cohen's attitude toward Judaism. This approach eschews outright rejection and involves a combination of criticism, retrieval, and transformation which preserves continuity with the traditions of the past. Cohen presents the general issue clearly. "Everywhere the question arises of whether the old idea one fights in a traditional institution should be entirely rejected and eliminated or whether it is the case that a new idea seeks a reconciliation with the old institution" (RR, 174-75). Cohen places continuity with traditional institutions as a "methodological signpost" (RR, 177) that represents a deep faithfulness to monotheism itself. At the same time, he does not shrink from what he calls the imperative of the "principle of development" (RR 177). Thus, in advance of the postcritical method of

textual reasoning, Cohen calls for a dialogue of “reciprocal effect” between traditional institutions and their development toward an enlightened monotheism

Ezekiel’s Breakthrough

For Cohen, the real hero of the battle against the regressive aspects of the institution of sacrifice, who at once preserves and develops the institution, is the prophet Ezekiel. All of the prophets criticized the abuses of the cult of sacrifice, but Ezekiel was first to break from the old purpose of expiating the guilt of the fathers to focus on the sins of the individual. In a common move of hermeneutical philosophy, Cohen asks contemporary Jews to place themselves in the position of Ezekiel when he performed his bold interpretive task.

We at once put ourselves before the historical problem which confronted Ezekiel and his successors. Is there really only one way to fight sacrifice, which is to reject it entirely? Or could one conceive of a fight against sacrifice that strives to transform its inward meaning? And would this kind of criticism and reformation still preserve the prophetic spirit? (RR, 174)

The breakthrough which Ezekiel makes is found in his famous chapter 18:

What shall you mean, that you use this proverb in the land of Israel, saying that fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge? As I live, says the Eternal God, you shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine; the soul that sins, it shall die (Ezek 18.2-4) The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father with him, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son (18.20).

With this breakthrough, the Biblical individual and her responsibility for herself is born. Beyond this, however, Ezekiel outlines a way for the wayward individual to re-make herself and return to God. This is through a “turn,” *shuv*, toward God; and this turning provides the rudiments of the remade institution of sacrifice as a vehicle of repentance, *t’shuva*, and atonement for the individual. “But if the wicked turn from all his sins that he has committed—he shall surely live, not die” (18.21). Ezekiel’s

innovation for the individual character, however, does not stop here. For the notion of "turning" means that human character is always a task and never set. The righteous, too, can turn away from the good and the consequences of their actions will also be noticed by God. "When the righteous turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered" (18.24).

This notion of the moral individual as an endless task is, as we suggested earlier, a hallmark of Cohen's notion of the moral self. It means that the human has an immense degree of freedom to create for himself "a new heart and a new spirit, (Ezek. 18:31)"; but it also means that there is a moral responsibility that is infinite. Cohen points out that the implications of Ezekiel's breakthrough are that a new conception of the human being has been forged.

Thus, the new man is born, in this way the individual becomes the I. Sin cannot prescribe one's way of life. A turning away from the way of sin is possible. Man can become a new man. *This possibility of self-transformation makes the individual an I.* Through his own sin, man first becomes an individual. Through the possibility of turning away from sin, however, the sinful individual becomes the free I" (RR, 193, Cohen's italics).

Cohen has performed a magnificent work of neo-Kantian interpretation which is a kind of "reconciliation" or "repair" of Israelite traditions of sacrifice and modern ethics. Yet, at this point, Cohen still has produced a fairly abstract and unliturgical method for the creation of the moral I. The self is presented as an isolated heroic individual carving out her path to freedom by her own will. However, this may be regarded as only an overall sketch of the goal of the process. In the remainder of Chapter Eleven, "Atonement," and Chapter Twelve, "The Day of Atonement," Cohen is clear that this moral work cannot be accomplished by the individual alone. The congregation, the priest, the liturgy of atonement, and God, are all necessary to achieve the process of moral self-creation.

Cohen returns to the context of the public institution of the court and the function which the legal procedure of confession has for helping to release the criminal from guilt. However, the sins which he speaks of in relation to the moral I are neither criminal nor civil crimes (RR, 217).

Rather, the sins that the rituals of atonement address arise from guilt for things not done or minor “unwitting” or “unintentional sins,” to which the Torah and later tradition give the label *shegagah* (Leviticus 5:8).⁴

The most egregious sins against other persons require criminal procedures, and lesser sins require a process of the self-seeking forgiveness from the injured party.⁵ These sins cannot be absolved by liturgy. But the category of sins committed *shegagah* still bother the conscience and detract from the moral integrity of the self. Therefore, they must be addressed. Cohen argues that the public institution that provides the individual with the tools of expiation is “divine worship” held in the context of the larger congregation. Cohen describes the public institution of transformed sacrifice and worship as a “moral institution” whose specific task is to aid the individual in her moral work.

This constantly new beginning must be joined to a public institution; it cannot be actualized merely in the silence and secrecy of the human heart. It is the meaning of all moral institutions that they support the individual in his moral work. This, indeed, is also the meaning of the legal formulations, that they formulate the idea of the will, and through this help man to achieve the actuality of action. A similar actuality is to be demanded from confession and to be sought in a public institution. This desire is satisfied by divine worship (RR, 196).

The Liturgy of Atonement and the Moral Education of the Will

After the time of Ezekiel in the 6th century BCE, the development of the Day of Atonement liturgy was long and complex, and Cohen gives us little of this development. Although there is some suggestion that in the rabbinic period the liturgy of Yom Kippur moved from a ritual of collective expiation of sin to a ritual through which individuals could

⁴ Later rabbinic law explicitly determined that “for sins which were committed intentionally and in defiance of the law, sacrifice was not permitted” (RR, 199).

⁵ Maimonides outlines a process of asking for forgiveness from the injured party. If the person refuses to forgive after the third time the sin falls on him! See Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Sepher Hamadah, “Hilkhot Teshuva.”* “Laws of Repentance,” *Mishna Torah: The Book of Knowledge* ed. Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1981).

work on their moral character, it took the influence of Maimonides in the medieval period and the innovations associated with German Reform Judaism and Cohen himself to initiate the transformation in the ritual which Cohen envisioned.

It is not our goal to fill in the historical links in the development of the liturgy, but rather, to present Cohen's creative interpretation of it. His objectives are quite clear: first, to follow the rational tradition in Jewish philosophy and to stress the centrality of the human will as opposed to divine grace in the moral purification of the self. And second, to carve out a role for institutions, law, the congregation, and public figures (like the priest) in this moralizing process. In addition, Cohen endeavors to spell out the place of God in this process. Thus, Cohen takes the contrary position to many modern Jewish liturgists and liberal Jews who believe that sacrifice "hindered and impaired" the ethical goals of monotheism and therefore needed to be expunged from all Jewish liturgy.⁶ Cohen argued, instead, that the institution of sacrifice led to a "deepening of monotheism" (RR, 198).

In reclaiming a positive moral role for the institution of sacrifice, Cohen, as we already suggested, must reinterpret it, repair it, and qualify its function. The trick for him is to stress that the function of the institution of sacrifice is a "support" to the moral work of the individual and not a substitute for that work.

Israelite sacrifice and its transformation into the Yom Kippur liturgy must, in Cohen's words, help to initiate a "self-sanctification" of the individual I in which the "autonomy of the will must remain inviolably in power" (RR, 202). Thus, the priest's activities reported in the liturgy's slaughtering the animal, sprinkling the altar with blood, and sending the Azazel, the "scapegoat," into the wilderness become "symbolic acts" (RR, 198) that help dramatize the activity of expiation of sin which the

⁶ Prayer for the re-establishment of the sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem were excised from liberal Reform prayer-books in the 19th century. In the recently published "Sim Shalom" (1998) prayer book of the United Synagogue, the Conservative movement, worshippers are offered an alternative to the musaf prayers that "omits mention of sacrifices" (174).

individual must go through. The *Kohen Gadol*, the high priest, after the process of purification which renders him fit to perform the Yom Kippur rituals, becomes something of a model of atonement. Cohen tells us that the “priest represents, symbolically, the purification, which the individual has to accomplish in himself” (RR, 200). Furthermore, Cohen argues that the congregation plays a crucial role in the process of self-purification. The individual “needs the congregation” (RR, 199) for the act of self-purification. The self-purification “has its peak” in the public “speech act” of the *vidui*, the confession of sins, that is ritualized in the *aveinu malkeinu* prayer of Rosh Hashanah, in the ten days of repentance, and in the Yom Kippur service. The “peak” that is reached in the *vidui*, however, is not an end but rather the middle of a process of repentance that has a number of steps.

These steps culminate in Ezekiel’s directive, “make you a new heart and new spirit” (18:31). To argue for the thoroughgoing nature of this self-transformation, Cohen quotes Jeremiah: “Let us search and try our ways, and return to Thee” (Lam 3:40). The reference to “our ways,” Cohen suggests, is a directive to address our “old way of life” (RR, 203), the entire gestalt of how we have been living in the world the “whole framework of human life” (RR, 205).

It is not clear why Cohen does not refer directly to Maimonides’s delineation of the steps of repentance from his *Hilkhot Teshuva*, his “Laws of Repentance.”⁷ Yet Maimonides’s description of the procedure for repentance shines clearly through Cohen’s discussion of the tasks of repentance. Like the Laws of Repentance, Cohen’s process of “self-sanctification” proceeds through a series of steps from showing remorse to a full-fledged self-transformation.

Repentance is *self-sanctification*. Everything that can be meant by remorse, turning to the depths of the self and examining the entire way of life and finally, the turning away and the returning and creating of a new way of life, all this is brought together in self-sanctification. It contains the

⁷ Moses Maimonides, “Laws of Repentance,” *Mishna Torah*.

power and the direction in which repentance must employ itself for the new creation of the true I (RR, 205).

Repentance "Before God"

Cohen states that the entire process of symbolic sacrifice by the priests, the public confession, and steps of self-sanctification all take place in relation to God. When he describes this process, however, he likes to use the phrase from Leviticus 13:30 that the process takes place *Lifnei Adonai*, "before God," to defeat any suggestion that God causes the sanctification and to emphasize the central role of the human will. Cohen suggests that God be understood as the "moral archetype" for humans. As a moral archetype, the process of *imitatio deo* then becomes the ultimate "goal" for the individual. God becomes "the ideal" for the penitent; and this means that she must know that her process is an "infinite task" (RR, 207) which is never finally fulfilled. Setting forth on the process of self-sanctification, before God, means that any new creation of the "true I" which is accomplished only issues in "the bliss of a moment" (RR, 204). But this is also a moment that can be "repeated unceasingly." The infinite nature of the task of ethical self-transformation means that God stands at the end of the process as a goal as opposed to the beginning of the process as the cause of the process. Thus, Cohen tells us that "God's entire relation to man is assigned to the domain of teleology which is different from all causality" (RR, 214).

The Liturgical Self

We might now want to pause to recollect the significance of Cohen's view of the self and the creation of the individual as a moral I for contemporary views of the self. Cohen's immediate dialogue partner is Kant, and he is trying to free the self from an abstract portrait in which individual reason, moral conscience, and moral agency are relatively unproblematic. This portrait includes elements that are at once philosophic and Protestant. In the same way that Cohen, as neo-Kantian, tries to "externalize" Kant's categories of understanding in social

processes of philosophy and science, Cohen also externalizes Kant's moral conscience in social processes of philosophy and law. Cohen's model of the self, then, introduces external standards that intervene between the self and itself as moral I and between the self and other. Thus, a kind of triadic relation is developed that includes the self, God/Divine Law, and the other. This follows a Jewish model in which morality is determined by divine commands and halakhah mediates all moral relationships. Jewish law, in this model, is not Kant's heteronomous law that renders the self passive and obedient and destroys moral autonomy. Rather, Jewish law is both part of and a support and guide for the autonomous self. However, the standards of divine law are both absolute and ideal and therefore the self often feels inadequate and guilty in the face of them. The self can easily then become morally paralyzed by feelings of guilt and sin. At this point, social liturgies of repentance offer a process through which the sense of moral integrity is restored and new energies for ethical action are made available. Through this process in which the community and God participate, the self makes itself into an "I." Because the self "makes itself" an I, because the self sees that it has the power and agency to transform itself into a moral being, the self gains confidence in its own moral powers and is therefore now adequate to the challenge of moral action. This is what Cohen means when he says that "self-transformation makes the individual an I." Yet because the self achieves moral selfhood in the context of a social liturgy with particular signs and behaviors and with the assistance and participation of the community, this self also becomes a particular individual. Through Jewish liturgy, the self therefore becomes a "Jewish self" as well as a moral self. The liturgical process simultaneously establishes the I as a Jew—that is, it secures Jewish identity—and pushes this individual Jew to act for the non-Jewish other.

Given the formative role that liturgy takes in the constitution of the self as moral Jewish "I" we can say that Cohen provides us with the rudiments of a "liturgical selfhood." This is a self that exists in and through a liturgical process. Because the moral I is both an endless and infinite process it does not really exist in a stable sense. To put this in the strongest terms: *outside of liturgical performance there is no moral I.* Yet within

the liturgy the moral I does exist. This is why the self must continually participate in liturgies of atonement. This is why liturgy is enacted daily. Although Cohen clearly focuses on the liturgies of the Day of Atonement, he suggests that atonement and repentance are central features and models for all Jewish liturgy. Cohen makes this obvious in *Religion of Reason* in Chapter Seventeen, which is titled "Prayer." We can see elements of atonement and repentance throughout the daily morning service. For just a few examples, note the repetition of the Akedah (the binding of Isaac) story with references to the merit of Abraham for forgiveness of sins, the *Amidah* prayer, and the *Tahanun* (supplication) prayers.

The liturgical nature of moral selfhood suggests that moral selfhood is an achievement, a product that has to be continually worked upon, exercised, and habituated throughout a lifetime. The central issue, then, is not only expiation of guilt but the formation of moral character. If we see Cohen's moral Jewish self as a daily and life achievement, we begin to see less of the Kantian and more of the Aristotelian and Maimonidean elements in Cohen's self.⁸ Cohen himself wanted to distinguish his "Jewish" notion of virtue, which distinguishes between human pleasure and morality and between morality and virtue, from Greek Platonic and Aristotelian notions that collapse morality into virtue (RR, 410ff). He is especially critical of the eudemonistic quality of Aristotle's character ethics and prefers a more ascetic form in which morality, as "the idea of the good," is different from virtue as practice. Yet, despite Cohen's own attempts to make his distinctions, there is an affinity between the liturgical self and a character ethics. The virtue and character dimension is

⁸ Maimonides has already shown in his "*Shemoneh Parakim*" (from his commentary on the Mishnah) how Aristotle's character ethics is applicable to the life of Halakah as a system that habituates Jews to moral actions. Yet where Aristotle argues that the virtuous character is an achievement with stability and durability Maimonides takes the view that we see in Ezekiel and in rabbinic thought, that one can never be totally secure in his moral status, "sin crouches always at the door," and therefore the virtuous self needs to be reconstituted daily. For a good translation see "Eight Chapters," *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*. Edited by R. L. Weiss and C. Butterworth, (NY: Dover, 1975).

underscored by the fact that liturgy enters to guide and mold the self through daily practices and remembrances. Liturgy then helps constitute a certain type of person, a “character” with certain dispositions and virtues. Cohen outlines his version of the Jewish moral virtues in the last chapters of *Religion of Reason*. These include “truth,” “justice,” “courage,” “faithfulness,” and “peace.”

The Liturgical Self, Postliberalism and Postmodernism

What Cohen’s liturgical self suggests is that in order for the goal of a universal philosophical ethics to succeed, it needs to ground the isolated modern self in her community. This is true for the Jew, and by extension it would also be true for the Christian, the Muslim, and others, for these communities all have the liturgical resources that are needed for the constitutions of the moral self. This claim, which is central to the postliberal position,⁹ is opposed to the tenor of modern enlightenment culture and religious liberalism. For the modern liberal view is that people need to shed themselves of their particular ethnic, religious, national identities in order to enter into relations with those “others” that they will meet in the cosmopolitan and secular city. The postliberal critique of this would be that if all people shed their individual identities there is no longer any meaning to otherness. Indeed, all will appear the same. Cohen’s model for the moral self as a liturgical self suggests that the cultural-linguistic systems of religions, specifically, of the monotheistic religions, are not necessarily impediments to the liberal humanitarian goals. When reinterpreted, these religious systems can be vehicles to instead of barriers against the fulfillment of humanitarian goals. At the same time, Cohen’s argument for the need to support the moral I in the face of the challenges of serving the other is an important corrective to Levinasian exclusive focus on the other. By focusing on the ethical

⁹ For extension discussions of the relevance and development of both postliberalism and the “cultural- linguistic” approach to religion thought and liturgy first made famous by George Lindbeck in his *Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1984), see my *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning*, “Introduction.”

obligations of the self, both to the other as *Du* and to the self, Cohen supplies us with a balanced ethical discussion of both sides of the ethical equation. Cohen's movement back to the I after establishing the need to attend to the other can, indeed, be used as a critique of Levinasian ethics for abandoning the I.¹⁰ Cohen shows that attention to the I is necessary for the sake of the other! For the other, precisely in her "otherness" and in the poverty and abuse that attends otherness, is dependent upon the actions of an ethical self to heal her. Indeed, a debilitated self will not even be able to stand up for itself, and will thus be useless to both other and self.

After Levinas, we have seen in the writings of literary critics and philosophers of postmodernism an expansion of the ethics of the other to an aesthetic and philosophy of "alterity." This has opened a vacuum that has sucked into itself all subjectivity, moral autonomy, and philosophical and ethical norms. Since Roland Barthes declared "the death of the author," critics like Fredrick Jameson have taken it as given, a presupposition of the postmodern condition, that the "subject has disappeared," that "the norm itself is eclipsed," "that there is an "absence of any great collective project."¹¹

Ihab Hassan has given us a long list of themes, terms, and tropes to define postmodernism. This list reads like a cultural wasteland filled with "Disjunction," "Exhaustion," "Absence," "Dispersal," "Indeterminacy."¹²

¹⁰ In chapter 12 of *Why Ethics?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), Robert Gibbs argues that Levinas does have a notion of the ethical value of the I that Gibbs refers to as the "Me" (see Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (The Hague, London: Nijhoff, 1981), 126.) Gibbs uses the "Me" to refute the charge against Levinas and other postmodern ethicists "that without autonomous subjects we cannot be responsible" (273). Gibbs argues that the Me is not the autonomous subject that is constituted by reason, it is the Me that is continually made through responding to the other. Gibbs makes a case that Levinas does have a notion of the responsible subject, but the focus of Levinas's work is certainly not that subject. Rather, the subject and her needs is largely assumed and the abuses exaggerated. Certainly, Levinas does not give attention to the liturgical and communal supports for the subject that Cohen is concerned with.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism," *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Edited by Thomas Docherty (NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 73.

¹²Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," *Postmodernism: A Reader*, 152.

Although the initial goal of postmodernism was to continue the traditions of ethics, philosophy, and aesthetics in a series of radical critiques of the abuses of modernity, the unintended consequence of this movement has been to undermine the very project of meaning making. Thus, all attempts to reconstruct communal identities, norms, and ethical systems are criticized as at best “naïve” or “ironic” or at worst “authoritarian,” “exclusive,” or “violent.” The consequence of this is that the “great collective project” of repairing modernity has become impossible. What Cohen’s liturgical self suggests is that human selfhood is dependent upon social processes that support it. And human selfhood at its highest level, that is, moral selfhood, requires religious social processes to support, purify, reinvigorate and sustain it. What Cohen’s liturgical self suggests is that moral selfhood is possible but that it takes a cultural-linguistic system, a system of moral goodness and faith, even a theology of the one God, to support such a self.

From Liturgical Selfhood to The Liturgical Community

Although the liturgies of the cultural-linguistic system of Judaism function to support the moral Jewish self, they do not end in personal selfhood. Clearly, the scope is larger than that. As liturgies are performed by the entire community, they also address the needs of the larger community and the larger world. Here, liturgy is about issues of redemption and messianism.

In his discussions on prayer in Chapter Seventeen, Cohen describes how prayer originates in (even as it comes to replace) the Israelite institutions of sacrifice and prophecy. Cohen uses the word “prayer,” *Das Gebet*, to describe this phenomenon, but as a collective institutional expression, he could have used the term we have adopted, “liturgy.” Following the collective institutions of sacrifice and prophecy, prayer (or liturgy) carries through with both the purifying and atoning power of sacrifice and the social morality of the prophets (RR, 371).

The self-examination and self-purification that the liturgy of Yom Kippur initiates does not end the realm of the individual. The purified and atoned individual cannot remain as a single one, in the white purity of the

Yom Kippur liturgy. The individual I, created by the liturgy, is quickly moved "in symbolic transference" to become a representative of the purified community Israel. The I as Israel must then move out of the synagogue to the world in the work for its redemption. The suffering that repentance, fasting, and atonement require the individual to undergo is an idealized and symbolic liturgical suffering that is, in its turn, transferred to the suffering in the world, which Israel undergoes for the sake of humankind. Therefore, Cohen sees Yom Kippur as a process of educating the self, the community, and Israel for "the great calling that has been allotted to them by their unique God" (RR, 235). Yom Kippur then becomes a "symbol for the redemption of mankind" (RR, 235). In this way, the liturgical moment becomes an interlude which is preceded and succeeded by involvement in the struggle for the infinite work for redemption that must be realized in the world and in history. For this reason, Cohen follows his chapter on Yom Kippur with a chapter on the prophetic "Idea of the Messiah and Mankind." Here he outlines the significance of the ideals portrayed in the Yom Kippur liturgy and the work of the moral individual for the alleviation of suffering in the world and the proclamation of the universal message of the unique God for all of humankind.

Cohen argues that prayer functions to transform the longing and love for God into a love for the congregation (RR, 378). In the public liturgical moment, Cohen says, "differences between individuals become reconciled and all men are equal before God" (RR, 388). This suggests that in liturgical acts people practice the ideal relations of brotherhood and sisterhood. In liturgy, people not only imagine ideal relations, but they get to act them out in a kind of theater of the ideal.

Cohen follows this suggestion with, perhaps, his boldest assertion for the power of liturgy, for he argues that prayer has the ability to offer "a common place," the synagogue, and a "common language" that "exceeds all the means of knowledge" (RR, 388) in philosophy. Liturgical or public prayer exceeds philosophical knowledge because it moves the individual in successive stages from the personal, to the particular collective of the people Israel, to universal humanity. Liturgical prayer opens the

individual to the broader collective and universal concerns through the incorporation of the concepts and images of prophetic messianism.

Cohen argues that we see this movement throughout the Jewish service but particularly in the concluding *Aleinu* prayer which looks toward the establishment of the “Kingdom of God.” Here, the earthly concerns of the individual receive their proper context by being placed “beside the heavenly goal” (RR, 388). In the *Aleinu*, the establishment of the congregation Israel is placed as a first step which leads to the future messianic fulfillment for universal humanity (RR, 385).

In the end of his chapter on prayer, Cohen makes it clear that prayer not only serves the function of the “idealization of the individual” (RR, 399), it gives the entire community an experience or actualization of that idealization. What the idealization of the human being means for Cohen is a ritual process of transformation through which the ideals of Ethical Monotheism are moved from the realm of the infinite and the ideal to the real in human lives.

In prayer’s ability to transform consciousness, it displays a moral power beyond ethics and philosophy, for where ethics can only define and postulate ideas, prayer actualizes them. In doing this, Cohen makes the audacious assertion that prayer constitutes the “universal language of humanity”: “Ethics defines its God to itself as the guarantor of morality on earth, but beyond the definition, beyond postulating this idea, its means fail. The peculiar contribution of religion to the ethical idea of God is the trust in God, the confidence in the messianic fulfillment of this idea. Thus prayer, as the language of the correlation of man and God, becomes the voice of messianism, and therefore the universal language of humanity” (RR, 398).

*This essay is taken from Steven Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), part 2, chapter 2.