

*Dedicated with deep love to my children Gitit, Nir, and Hillah, to my son-in-law Udi, my daughter-in-law Noa, and my grandchildren Naama, Gilad, Shira, Tehillah, Yeelah, and Yehonathan, who are always in my prayers.*

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As is true of my other works, this book would not have come to life without the two sites of my professional activity—Bar-Ilan University and the Shalom Hartman Institute. My colleagues and students at the Program for Hermeneutics and Cultural Studies, which I founded in 1999 and directed until 2013, enriched me in ways evident throughout this entire work. The Shalom Hartman Institute has been my home for decades. The basic questions raised in the book and the possibility of formulating a position out of attention and empathy are the very core of the profound dialogue that takes place within its walls. These two sites of my activity create the vital tension required to embark on a search for new ways, a search manifest in this book.

# Introduction

Father, what will a son do not to sin—  
and his heaven holds no God to love, fear, and pray to.<sup>1</sup>

We are not silent!  
The only silent one is you.<sup>2</sup>

“Who could be so inhuman as to play the observer if he saw a person praying with his whole soul? Who would not rather be permeated by an emanation from the devotion of the person praying?”<sup>3</sup> These lines by Søren Kierkegaard are the reflections of a believer. But one need not be a believer to be amazed by the rootedness and uniqueness of prayer’s role in human existence. Prayer is not merely another human practice and, at times, it encapsulates the worshipper’s entire being. The Psalmist seems to capture this special phenomenon when he says: “But I prayer” (Psalms 109:4). Joining a subject—I—and a noun—prayer—is seemingly problematic, and a more plausible formulation would have been “And I pray”—a verb joining a subject. The Psalmist may have wished to determine an identity whereby the I is prayer. Henceforth, rather than an act performed at a particular time and place, prayer is permanent and coextensive with the self. The well known biblical exegete R. Shlomo Yitzhak (known as Rashi) hints at this interpretation when he writes: “‘But I prayer’: But I pray to you constantly” (Rashi, *ad locum*). Prayer is thus a characterization of humans rather than a specific ritual action: humans are praying beings, regardless of the object addressed in the prayer.

The formal characterization of humans as praying beings was first suggested by Samuel Dresner.<sup>4</sup> As is usually the case, however, Dresner’s perspective is theological—he relied on a religious conceptual framework that makes the assumption of God’s existence its core. The present book, by contrast, rests on a phenomenological viewpoint (described below) rather than on a theology. This viewpoint enables the suspension of judgment,

<sup>1</sup> Yitzhak Lamdan, “To Father,” *Collected Poems* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1973), 84 [Heb].

<sup>2</sup> Abba Kovner, “Master of the Dreams,” *Collected Poems*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2004), 41 [Heb].

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 134.

<sup>4</sup> See Samuel H. Dresner, *Prayer, Humility and Compassion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1957), 22–28.

refrains from theory or speculation, and focuses on the phenomenon *per se*: humans are praying beings and the object of prayer can change without detracting from this basic characterization.

Indeed, many generations after the Psalmist, two contemporary Hebrew poets would refer to humans as praying beings. Levi Ben Amitai writes:

At a meager meal with a company of Levites  
I will utter song and praise to you:  
Blessed art thou for the manure,  
for the meal, and for the feeling of prayer.<sup>5</sup>

The poet of the kibbutz movement, who was enthralled by the “fields in the valley,”<sup>6</sup> makes life in the commune the subject of his poetry. He utters a song of praise for the fullness of this new life and sees himself as a servant of the people, one in “a company of Levites” uttering “song and praise.” The poem culminates in a blessing for “the feeling of prayer.” The poem does not bless prayer as such but the subjective experience of the *feeling* of prayer, which is a power unique to human existence and crucial to its very form. The object of the prayer remains unknown. The traditional Jewish blessing, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God,” is replaced by “Blessed art thou.” But who is this “thou”? Is it God? Or is it perhaps the comrade, the partner to the communitarian’s life? Or perhaps both of them? What is the meaning of concealing the addressee, a recurring feature in Ben Amitai’s poems?<sup>7</sup> These questions, which will be at the focus of the discussion, do not blur the poem’s meaning. It is the feeling, meaning the disposition that creates the prayer, that we should bless and be grateful for, conveying that this is not an obvious occurrence. Even if humans are praying beings and even if they do have a “feeling of prayer,” the feeling could fade away, a development entailing potential implications beyond the loss of the feeling as such—something in human existence would disappear.

Hannah Szenes too, in her famous poem “Walking to Caesarea,” emphasizes the experience of wonder inherent in human prayer:

My God, My God, may they never end,  
The sand, and the sea,

<sup>5</sup> Levi Ben Amitai, “In the Commune,” *Selected Poems* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), 18 [Heb].

<sup>6</sup> “Fields in the Valley” (the Jezreel valley), one of Ben Amitai’s most famous poems, is the first in the collection. See *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 104–107. In other poems, particularly later ones, Ben Amitai clearly identifies the addressee—see *ibid.*, 133–134. Note that the poems where the addressee is God appear in “Elegies for a Wife’s Death.” But the identification of the hidden addressee as God is not determined solely by the experience of death. The experiences following the 1967 Six-Day War had a similar effect. See, for example, *ibid.*, 186.

The rush of the waters,  
The crash of the heavens,  
The prayer of man.<sup>8</sup>

The prayer is a request for the eternity of what is—the sand and the sea, the waters and the heavens—and, in the same breath, for the eternity of prayer—“the prayer of man.” In this poem too, as in Ben Amitai’s, the gist of the request is not the prayer to God, and the prayer does not necessarily express a yearning for God. Instead, it is an appeal to God to ensure the eternity of the act of prayer. Something will be lacking in human existence were prayer to disappear.

Many believers stirred by prayer could not explain its actual occurrence without assuming that it is the work of God’s grace. An echo of this feeling resonates in the poems of Szenes and Ben Amitai, who feel the need to thank whoever enabled the “feeling of prayer” or the “prayer of man.”

Prayer has indeed captured the thought and imagination of thinkers and writers, both believers and non-believers. It became a topic in psychological, sociological, cultural, and philosophical research because it is a puzzling phenomenon, emblematic of the gap between humans and the surrounding reality. In prayer, humans return to this reality, evaluate it, affirm it, or seek to correct it. Prayer epitomizes the Promethean moment in human existence. It refuses the absolute dominance of the given and makes hope and expectation the linchpin of existence. Prayer is a reflection where we examine our world and our standing within it.

Non-believers may also find themselves praying. Do their prayers imply a return to religion and tradition? For believers, this is indeed the only meaning of prayer:

What does the simple, devout person, undisturbed by reflection, think when he prays? He believes that he speaks with a God, immediately present and personal, has intercourse with Him, that there is between them a vital and spiritual commerce. There are three elements which form the inner structure of the prayer-experience: faith in a living personal God, faith in His real, immediate presence, and a realistic fellowship into which man enters with a God conceived as present.

Every prayer is a turning of man to another Being to whom he inwardly opens his heart; it is the speech of an “I” to a “Thou.” This “Thou,” this other with whom the devout person comes into relation,

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Szenes, “Walking to Caesarea,” *Poems and Diary* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2005), 5 [Heb].

in whose presence he stands as he prays, is no human being but a supersensuous, superhuman Being on whom he feels himself dependent, yet a being who plainly wears the features of a human personality, with thought, will, feeling, self-consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

But a prayer erupting into our day-to-day reality without a religious-theological context could convey the primordially of prayer, our existence as praying beings. In this book, I do not propose another theory and further speculation about the origin of prayer. Instead, I seek to trace the self-reflection of Hebrew writers who, in a kind of *augenblick* (as the one noted above in Szenes and Ben Amitai), shed light or, more precisely, attest to the meaning of prayer in their world, even if this meaning is implicit. Literature thus appears here as a kind of depth testimony to a reality that erupts into its language and is embodied by it.

Since my childhood, I have lived in a world of prayer. I have always lived with people who pray, and I am one of them. When I reached maturity and learned about the meaning of prayer suggested by contemporary thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik (whose work I discuss mainly in Chapter Seven), I found the various theories extremely disappointing. None of the suggested approaches explained the practice of prayer as it is concretized in everyday life, and all left the riddle of prayer unresolved. Where I grew up, people's prayers flowed from their heart rather than from a legal obligation. Prayer did not derive from a divine command or from some *Shulhan Arukh* statute, as Leibowitz claimed. The halakhic canon did shape the framework, but prayer appeared to break through from a deeper foundation, embodying aspects beyond duty. This foundation is evident in a body language unique to prayer,<sup>10</sup> and in melodies and poetic additions. Nor did prayer always conveyed a dialogue with God, as argued by Hermann Cohen and, in his wake, by Soloveitchik. Indeed, the worshippers I meet often hope that their prayers will reach God, but they cannot be sure of it. The *Amidah* prayer opens with the statement: "O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise." This statement calls attention to the worshippers' anxiety. Whoever has experienced religious prayer knows how burdened it is by anxiety about the possibility of connection and how deeply it rests on a

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, trans. Samuel McComb (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 356.

<sup>10</sup> For a rich discussion of the body language of prayer, see Uri Ehrlich, *The Non-Verbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach to Jewish Liturgy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).



disposition that, paradoxically, combines intimacy with fear. What we find in the synagogues and in prayers is not the dialogical connection with God but the standing before God—"I have set the Lord always before me." This standing involves both terror and comfort, distance and closeness, expectation and waiting for a response—not really dialogue.

Rosenzweig's stance did not explain prayer either. I could not understand why I should adopt views that assume prayer is the parallel of prophecy and an expression of God's action. I found no evidence of this approach in the worshippers' experiences. When I studied this view, I was easily able to identify the cultural-philosophical context of its development but, usually, worshippers are neither philosophers nor theologians.

What impresses me most is the natural way in which worshippers utter their prayers together with the fact that, for many, their entire being converges in prayer. The typical expression of this reality is the body's adaptation to the act of prayer. Because of this natural quality of prayer and its bodily correlation, the biblical expression "I poured out my soul" (I Samuel 1:15), which in Jewish tradition denotes prayer, failed to resonate for me. Prayer comes forth from a person's depths, as self speech.

Observing individuals who are not believers corroborated this perspective. Prayer is a primordial phenomenon in people's lives. They pray, be it using the words of a familiar prayer or resorting to poetry and music. The correlation and the similarity between prayer and other practices—poetry, music, dance—can hardly be ignored.

Now I confronted a question: is it God—or the transcendent addressee—that endows prayer with meaning? Can a practice so primordial in human life depend on an obviously contingent religious stance? Even from a religious perspective, faith is not a logical necessity. Prayer is an expression of the believer's world and beliefs, and only that. Does a phenomenon as primordial as prayer depend on faith? And is it a fair judgment to say that whenever people pray they go back to religion? If prayer is primordial and even natural, the interpretation of it must turn the "original datum" into less than what it is.

The question, then, is how to contend with the question of prayer. I chose Hebrew literature, particularly the one called "secular," for reasons I consider in Chapter One. The present book is an attempt to outline the meaning of prayer as embodied in this literature and the gist of the book, covering Chapters Three to Six, is devoted to rigorous textual analysis. This detailed inquiry into prayer in this literature explicates the "datum" and establishes the findings as based on a kind of recurrent experience rather

than as a localized hunch. In the wake of this explication, I suggest in the last chapter a “theory” of prayer. I place “theory” in quotes to imply that I am not suggesting a wild hypothesis based on theological or metaphysical assumptions about the meaning of prayer. From a phenomenological perspective, the “theory” I am proposing is a framework that emerges from the data and purportedly reflects the implicit depth constructs borne by the texts that were examined. The theory is an interpretation, and nothing more. The uniqueness of this interpretation, which follows in the footsteps of the literary evidence, is that it dismisses the option of prayer as part of a specific world view and, instead, brings together all forms of prayers and worshippers: religious, secular, traditional, or anyone rejecting dichotomous labels. The interpretation suggested in the last chapter thus challenges dichotomies, which confuse reality instead of explicating it. They force us to separate and distinguish instead of seeing the common agenda.

This is a book about prayers and worshippers. The worshippers are wounded by the prayer that pervades their being, but prayer is also what heals this wound. The story of those wounded by prayer is the story of grappling with prayer.

I write with deep respect for prayer and worshippers. Instead of reducing it to psychological, cultural, or other terms, I seek to explain prayer as it emerges from the testimonies of its practitioners, who, in the current context, are writers and poets. The book, then, studies the meaning of prayer’s “language game” rather than its causes. I do not delve into the problematic of reductionist theories and present some of my critique in the course of the book. For now, I will only point out that the study of meaning rather than of causes fits the phenomenological-hermeneutical perspective that has guided me in this as in other works.

Chapter One proposes a method for the analysis of the literary works, and Chapter Seven, the last, presents the conclusions emerging from this analysis. Chapter Two attempts to clarify the meaning of the “death of God” and the implications of this cultural phenomenon for the possibility of prayer. The main section of the book, Chapters Three through Six, is an hermeneutical phenomenological study of literary texts. The study relies on a close reading of the works, which are presented as extensively as possible. This presentation plays a dual role: it conveys an attempt to bring to the readers a body of work not necessarily accessible, and it enables the reader to participate in the discourse. Like most of my books, this one too invites readers to a dialogue.

## PRAYER AND HEBREW LITERATURE

This book asks a question: what is the meaning of prayer in a world where God is no longer? This is a world constituted through the charged combination of a divine presence in the past and its absence or departure in the present. In the wake of Hegel and Heine, Nietzsche referred to this new reality as the death of God, a term denoting a presence that has evaporated, a fullness that is now empty.

The world of the death of God differs from that of the atheist because an atheist is unlike one who no longer has faith. Atheism has two prevalent denotations. According to the more common one, atheism indicates that the term “God” does not signify an entity in reality. For this kind of atheist, the statement “there is no God” is a negation, postulating that the theistic claim whereby the term “God” signifies a metaphysical entity is false. According to another use, an atheist is a person who does not believe in God even if there is one.<sup>1</sup> In the former denotation, atheism is a metaphysical stance. In the latter, it is an existential one—this atheist does not believe in God, does not trust God, and does not need God, even if there is one. Although both these denotations have been used, I hold that the former is the most prevalent and will be the one at the focus of my discussion.

A theist can become an atheist and still not have a “death of God” experience. What distinguishes an atheist from one who experiences the “death of God” is the meaning of the religious past. This past is significant (at times traumatically so) for someone who has lived thought the “death of God,” but is not necessarily relevant to an atheist who may never have had a religious experience or suffered the disappointment it entails. The “death of God” is thus part of the history of religion as the refusal of faith, whereas atheism is not necessarily a part of this history. Experiencing the death of God means being aware of a presence that has left, living through an amputation that hurts the one bearing its memory. For the atheist, the past or the

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the two uses, see Martin Michael, “General Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–7.

present wherein people believe in God reflects the history of an error or an irrelevance. But for one enduring the “death of God,” the past—meaning the history of faith—is a bleeding wound requiring a response. Dialectically, one who experiences the “death of God” reaffirms God’s presence in the past as well as in the present by repeatedly proclaiming that what is missing in the present had existed in the past, and this absence evokes an emotional as well as an existential response.

The distinction between the experience of atheism and that of the death of God is not only theoretical, and emerges recurrently in Hebrew literature. For instance, in a harrowing dialogue between Gideon and Yitzhak in Yosef Arikha’s story “Bread and Vision,” Gideon says:

—I once leaned toward faith, but I have never prayed. There were no prayers in my heart . . . The God of Israel is a cruel God, “a vengeful and jealous God” who mustn’t be annoyed with prayers because he doesn’t answer. One shouldn’t pray to him. I don’t think there *is* a God. Anyway, no signs of life from him . . . He may be fooling us. . .

—But why this anger?

—Why? To this day the screams and the cries of the slaughtered and tortured in the Ukraine pierce my years! . . . That was the day I lost my faith and said: Damned is the maker of man! I cursed him many times . . .

—But don’t you then admit to his existence?<sup>2</sup>

This exchange pinpoints the difference between an atheist and one who experiences the “death of God.” Gideon is not an atheist. His refusal to pray conveys his disappointment with God. But this very disappointment denotes how intensely he holds on to God, his failed expectation. Yitzhak can therefore tell him—“But don’t you then admit his existence?” Atheists, as noted, either do not admit that God exists or do not believe in God and therefore expect nothing. Gideon, however, is not an atheist. He confronts the “death of God,” the disappointment with God that is paradoxically part of faith and, more precisely, of the faith that failed.

The “death of God” is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, but these preliminary remarks help to set the proper focus on the meaning of prayer in this book. The book deals with those “wounded by prayer,” those who have been hurt by prayer as a living memory or as an ongoing practice that requires explanation. The “wounded” are those who are still bleeding and need help.

<sup>2</sup> Yosef Arikha, *Bread and Vision* (Tel Aviv: Twersky, 1946), 45 [Heb].

The fundamental question I ask in this book is: is there any meaning to prayer after the “death of God”? In one of the most lucid evaluations of prayer, Ludwig Feuerbach stated: “The essential acts of religion, that in which religion puts into action what we have designated as its essence, is prayer.”<sup>3</sup> Three religious thinkers formulate this insight from a religious perspective. R. Nahman of Bratslav states: “And faith is prayer.”<sup>4</sup> The Protestant theologian Auguste Sabatier claims: “Prayer is religion in act—that is to say, real religion. It is prayer which distinguishes religious phenomena from all those which resemble them or lie near to them.”<sup>5</sup> In a similar spirit, Hermann Cohen states that prayer

comprises in itself the entire content of worship . . . Prayer is an original form of monotheism . . . No people lacks, and could not lack, the general type of prayer insofar as that people expresses its relation to a godhead in language. The first stammering of man in his direct address to God can be nothing other than prayer.<sup>6</sup>

The perception of prayer as the quintessence of religion and, even more so, as the quintessence of monotheism rests on the assumption that prayer embodies the relationship between humans and God, which is the foundation of religion. Martin Buber and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, apparently under the influence of Hermann Cohen, view the dialogical stance vis-à-vis God as a necessary condition for the very occurrence of prayer. Buber holds:

The man who prays pours himself out in unrestrained dependence, and knows that he has—in an incomprehensible way—an effect upon God, even though he obtains nothing from God; for when he no longer

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 122. See also Jean-Louis Chrétien, “The Wounded Word: The Phenomenology of Prayer,” in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*, ed. Dominique Janicaud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 147–149. This approach is also found in the work of Friedrich Heiler, who refers to prayer “as the central phenomenon of religion.” See Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, trans. Samuel McComb (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), v. See also *ibid.*, v–xvi. William James endorses a similar approach: “Prayer . . . is the very soul and essence of religion . . . Prayer is religion in act . . . It is prayer that distinguishes the religious phenomenon from such similar or neighboring phenomena.” William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 358–359. In part of this citation, James quotes the theologian Auguste Sabatier, who is discussed below.

<sup>4</sup> R. Nahman of Bratslav, *Likutey Moharan* (Bnei Brak: Yeshivat Bratslav, 1972), 8 [Heb].

<sup>5</sup> Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972), 371.

desires anything for himself he sees the flame of his effect burning at its highest.<sup>7</sup>

Buber argues that a person praying or bringing a sacrifice expresses the same disposition: “. . . sacrifice and prayer are set ‘before the Face,’ in the consummation of the holy primary word that means mutual action: they speak the *Thou*, and then they hear,” contrary to the one who turns to magic: “Magic desires to obtain its effects without entering into relation, and practises its tricks in the void.”<sup>8</sup>

Soloveitchik, who was influenced by both Cohen and Buber, formulated this idea as follows: “Prayer likewise is unimaginable without having man stand before and address himself to God in a manner reminiscent of the prophet’s dialogue with God.”<sup>9</sup> He emphasizes that prayer should not be identified with its liturgical, external signs: “Prayer is basically an awareness of man finding himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, and to prayer has one connotation only: to stand before God.”<sup>10</sup>

A study of traditional Jewish prayers shows them to be founded on the phenomenological construct of intentionality. Prayer is the act of a praying subject turning to God. In any intentional act, the act cannot be isolated from its object and, at first glance, this statement appears to apply to prayer as well. In an ordinary intentional act, however, the object is constituted by the subject’s action. An object such as a table or a chair is “for” the subject, who constitutes it through the performance of a predicating action. The subject characterizes the table or the chair, and this description determines what the object is. In traditional prayer, however, God is a constitutive rather than a constituted object. Without God’s primary and pre-predicative presence, prayer is impossible: the stance “vis-à-vis” God determines God’s primary and unconditioned status. This presence shatters the subject’s sovereignty. It breaks into the subject’s world and refuses to be a constituted entity. For believers, prayer is a basic expression of presence. Only a subject who assumes to be standing before God—“I have set the Lord always before me”—a God independent of the self, can turn to God in prayer. If humans make God or create him through the action of consciousness, what is the logic of turning to him? From the believer’s perspective—creating a god to

<sup>7</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 1958), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 34–35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

which one turns in prayer is a senseless act. What is created by humans and conditioned by them cannot serve as a proper destination of prayer.

The comparison between prophecy and prayer suggested by Soloveitchik is highly revealing—prophets do not lose their human subjectivity, but prophecy is an act of divine presence independent from the prophet, who is overwhelmed by the word of God beating from within. Similarly, prayer cannot take place without an experience of the divine presence, and yet this presence neither threatens nor silences the individual. In prayer, says Feuerbach, humans turn to God as Thou, confessing before God as the entity closest to them. Feuerbach goes so far as saying that prayer is the clear declaration that God is the worshipper's alter ego.<sup>11</sup> The conclusion warranted by this analysis is that, in the absence of God, prayer cannot take place; if God is dead, who is the addressee of the prayer?!

But is the "death of God" indeed the death of prayer? In search of an answer to this question, I will analyze the reflections of Hebrew writers on the meaning of prayer. My interest is not in the many prayer texts found in Hebrew literature, but in texts where the literary expression creates a kind of initial reflection about prayer and its meaning in a world where God is dead.

The fact that the texts I use are taken from Hebrew literature should not be interpreted as a concern with its historiography or its poetics. It is not my intention to engage in a study of the writers, or the works, or the biographical or social-cultural contexts that were at the cradle of the texts discussed. The method of my study is thus not diachronic but synchronic.<sup>12</sup> I will listen to the literary texts, follow their course, and trace the meaning of the prayer that takes shape within them. The text is the objective guideline leading the study. My concern is to retrieve from Hebrew literature the meaning, the "*eidos*" (in phenomenological terminology) ascribed to prayer, to analyze how the meaning of prayer becomes manifest in Hebrew literature. Hence, it is shaped by the question itself and by the themes that answer it, as they emerge in the literature. The literary text is the phenomenological "datum" that I seek to analyze and explicate.

The relationship between literature and philosophy is not a simple one. As Friedrich Schlegel noted: "The whole history of modern poetry is a running commentary on the following brief philosophical text: all art

<sup>11</sup> Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of synchronic research, see Aron Gurwitsch, "Phenomenology of Perceptions," in *An Invitation to Phenomenology*, ed. James M. Edie (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1965), 45-102.

should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one.”<sup>13</sup> This statement emphasizes the literary content and assigns it greater weight than the formal-artistic aspect, and can therefore claim unity between them. Schlegel does not argue that philosophy is an interpretation of poetry but, rather unexpectedly, the opposite: poetry is an interpretation of philosophy. Poetry expands and completes the spectrum of meanings found in the brief philosophical text. We tend to think of the poetic text as the brief version and the philosophical text as the long one, whereas Schlegel holds precisely the opposite. The length of the texts, then, is not a function of their size. The pages of the philosophical books are “short” because they are not sufficiently clear, and what explains them is poetry. What kind of explanation does poetry create for philosophy? How is philosophy less successful than poetry?

Schlegel held that modern poetry, referring to the Romantic poetry that he dealt with, could unite the entire range of cultural, artistic, and philosophical existence by melting everything into the poem and projecting it back into life. The aim of Romantic poetry “isn’t merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical.” Schlegel added that poetry can create a poetic reflection “and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors.”<sup>14</sup> According to this approach, poetry spans the full spectrum of insights and creates a process of full and consistent understanding; it is far more comprehensive than philosophy, which is included in it.

Despite this Romantic perspective, however, literature is not philosophy and certainly not phenomenology. Milan Kundera warns us against the attempt to bring philosophy, any philosophy (including phenomenology) closer to the novel: “The novel’s wisdom is different from that of philosophy. . . . The art . . . does not by nature serve ideological certitudes. . . . It undoes each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers, and learned men have woven the day before.”<sup>15</sup>

Kundera’s remarks are valid for all literary genres. The power of literature is embodied in its ability to capture a mood’s ephemeral, unstructured

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich von Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 160.



moments.<sup>16</sup> Literature is, above all, an artistic endeavor; it is not philosophy and certainly not an interpretation of philosophy.

Nevertheless, literature can be a testimony that conveys a life experience. This is how Shoshana Felman relates to Elias Canetti's judgment on Franz Kafka's *Letters to Felice*. Canetti writes: "To call these letters a document would be saying too little, unless one were to apply the same title to the life-testimonies of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoyevsky."<sup>17</sup> Felman explains:

A "life testimony" is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*. As such Kafka's correspondence is testimony not merely to the life of Kafka but to something larger than the life of Kafka.<sup>18</sup>

The witness, Felman notes, "from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*."<sup>19</sup> This kind of testimony cannot be final, nor does it necessarily reflect the full awareness of the witness, who, although he is the one giving the testimony, is a voice for something that transcends him. Felman then claims that literature as testimony reflects the witness' "readiness to become himself a *medium of the testimony*—and a *medium of the accident*."<sup>20</sup> Not all poetry is a testimony to an accident, but poetry or prose can become that. Ultimately, deciding what literature is testimony and testimony of an accident is left to the reader—the judge. Often the meaning of the specific "something" that the text delivers depends on the reader's starting point, since a testimony is not necessarily transparent. A literary text is not, as noted, a reflective philosophical essay and its explication is therefore contingent on the reader.

Hermeneutically, the text's meaning is neither given nor self-evident and depends on the reader. The very perception of a text as testimony reflects a presumption that is imposed on the text, stating that the text bears a meaning that has been fulfilled within the literary creation.

<sup>16</sup> This issue is discussed at length in my book, *The Human Voyage to Meaning: A Philosophical-Hermeneutical Study of Literary Works* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press: 2009) [Heb].

<sup>17</sup> Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, trans. Christopher Middleton (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2 (emphasis in original).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 (emphasis in original).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 (emphasis in original).

Combining the theory that views literature as testimony (in Felman's terms) and the phenomenological method is not a random choice. It is through this method that the testimony, which is at times articulated implicitly rather than reflectively, can gradually emerge. Phenomenology thus contributes to testimony theory the tool that makes the clarification and explanation of the testimony possible.

My starting point in the reading of texts dealing with prayer is the existentialist view of literature as conveying a life experience.<sup>21</sup> This starting point is neither arbitrary nor based on an a priori theoretical preference. I will not enter into a discussion of the theoretical question about the relationship between life and literature. My claims are limited solely to texts about prayer, and my perspective is largely determined by their contents and their cultural context. The literary interest in prayer in the period that concerns me—secular Hebrew literature as the literature of a society and a culture in the making—reflects the concrete existential problematic of its authors. The term “prayer” as addressed by these writers has its roots in the world reflected in their work. Hence, prayer is for them an existential question that should not be confined to the realm of poetic-aesthetic discourse.

This closeness between literature and existentialist philosophy is not fortuitous. A philosophy attempting to capture concrete existence cannot limit itself to abstract formulations and must find a way to enter life. Literature, more than philosophy, can capture the *augenblick* through which to grasp life. Literature, more than philosophy, can offer a complex phenomenology of life, including its latent options and contingencies. It describes situations, actions, and events in a way that is close to life itself,<sup>22</sup> and its time is that of life per se, unlike that of philosophy. For philosophy, writes Franz Rosenzweig, “thinking is timeless and wants to be timeless,”<sup>23</sup> since its gist is the abstract general claim. “The new thinking,” in Rosenzweig's terms—meaning the philosophy concerned with life as such—cannot be satisfied with general claims and must pave a way to life, to its temporality and historicity, to its contingency and fragility, to human discourse and human loneliness. Literature, not philosophy, offers a way to life. Not in vain does the phenomenological description of life per se carry such significant weight in existentialist thought. This thorough description is meant to pave a way to life as is, regardless of whether the description

<sup>21</sup> This issue is discussed at length in my book *To Be a Jew: Joseph Hayyim Brenner as a Jewish Existentialist*, trans. Batya Stein (London: Continuum, 2011), ch. 3.

<sup>22</sup> See also Iris Murdoch, *Existentialism and Mystics* (New York: Penguin Press, 1997), 3–30.

<sup>23</sup> Nahum Glatzer, ed., *Franz Rosenzweig, His Life and Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 199.

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