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DIVREI TORAH
IN MEMORY OF
DR. ABRAHAM
JOSHUA HESCHEL

A. J. Heschel, Hasidic Prayer and Process Philosophy

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It is singularly appropriate to reflect on the memory of our beloved teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, during a service of prayer. Heschel emphasized the primacy of prayer, not only in Jewish living but also in Jewish teaching.

“The test of an authentic theology,” Heschel wrote, “is the degree to which it reflects and enhances the power of prayer, the way of worship.”¹ Furthermore, in prayer, Heschel contended, we perceive most directly the state of our souls. Depth and authenticity are disclosed in moments of genuine worship. Prayer for Heschel is thus a vehicle for measuring the authenticity of both our inner life and our theology.

If prayer for Heschel is the test of an authentic theology, to understand Heschel’s philosophical theology properly we must begin with his notion of prayer.

Heschel was steeped in the Kabbalah. A Kabbalistic view of prayer is described in Isaiah Horowitz’s great compendium, *Shnei Luhot Ha-brit*, a text which Heschel encouraged his students to study. In this text, the Kabbalistic view of prayer is described as *avodah le-tzorekh gavoah*² (worship for the needs of the Most High), implying that in a sense God needs man’s worship. This is a major theme in Heschel’s theology: God is in need of man.

In his book, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, Heschel offers a definition of the distinctiveness of the Jewish religion. He explains:

There is only one way to define Jewish religion. It is the *awareness of God’s interest in man*. . . . Our task is to concur with His interest, to carry out His vision of our task. God is in need of man for the attainment of His ends, and religion, as the Jewish tradition understands it, is a way of serving these ends. Life is a *partnership* of God and man. The essence of Judaism is the awareness of the reciprocity of God and man, of man’s togetherness with Him who abides in eternal otherness.’’³

Passages from the Midrashic literature support Heschel’s concept of the Jewish religion.

In *Genesis Rabbah*, man is conceived of as a partner with God in creation: "From the first day of creation, the Holy One, blessed be He, longed to enter into partnership with the terrestrial world, to dwell with His creatures within the terrestrial world."⁴

And in the *Pesikta* we read, "When Israel performs the will of the Omnipresent, they add strength to the heavenly power. When, however, Israel does not perform the will of the Omnipresent, they weaken, if it is possible to say so, the great power of Him who is above."⁵

Given that the essence of the Jewish religion is the concept of the reciprocity between God and man, we would expect Heschel to define prayer as a dialogue between man and God. It is interesting to note that Heschel refuses to take that step. In his major work on prayer, *Man's Quest for God*, Heschel discusses this question:

Prayer is not a soliloquy, but is it a dialogue with God? Does man address Him as person to person? It is incorrect to describe prayer by analogy with human conversation; we do not communicate with God. We only make ourselves communicable to Him. It is not a relationship between person and person, between subject and subject, but an endeavor to become the object of His thought."⁶

Heschel's methodology bears some affinity with and was influenced by the phenomenological method inaugurated by the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Husserl's phenomenology is essentially a descriptive method of studying the "logos," the structure of phenomena. This method is especially fruitful in the study of religious phenomena. Phenomenology of religion is an effort to describe and understand the structures of the religious consciousness. In his essay, "Prayer as Discipline," Heschel gives a phenomenological analysis of the act of prayer:

To worship God means to forget the self; an extremely difficult, though possible act. What takes place in a moment of prayer may be described as a shift of the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. Prayer begins as an it-He relationship. I am not ready to accept the ancient concept of prayer as dialogue. Who are we to enter into dialogue with God? The better metaphor would be to describe prayer as an act of immersion, comparable to the ancient Hebrew custom of immersing oneself completely in the waters as a way of self-purification to be done over and over again. In other words it is not as an I

that we approach God, but rather through the realization that there is only one "I" (God).⁷

The goal of prayer for Heschel, therefore, is to become a thought of God, an object of the Divine consciousness, to be known by God. Emphatically, for Heschel, in the act of prayer man is the object and God is the subject.

It is imperative to note that in his conception of the relation of man and God Heschel differs decisively from Martin Buber. For Heschel, the man-God relationship is not one of I and Thou but rather, in the last analysis, of it and He. What is the significance of this difference between these two great contemporary Jewish thinkers?

Buber, as Grete Schader points out, was a Hebrew humanist. But there is a lurking danger in Buber's humanism, as expressed by a commentator on his work:

The danger of Buber's humanism is that God is made a respondent of man. Although Buber everywhere insists that God acts, that God reveals, what in fact does God do that is not in response to man? Where is the initiative of God before which man—sullen and unbowed—*must* yield?⁸

There is no such danger in Heschel's theology. The Kierkegaardian qualitative difference between man and God is maintained steadfastly in Heschel's thought. Furthermore, Heschel's theology is more authentically Hasidic than Buber's.

Heschel's theology of prayer reflects the essential characteristics of Hasidic contemplative prayer, described by Louis Jacobs in his book *Hasidic Prayer*:

For Hasidism, with varying emphasis, the only true reality is God. The Hasid can learn to restore all things to their Source and to see only the infinite Divine power as this is manifested in creation. This is the Hasidic doctrine of *panentheism*, that all is in God. The Hasid is expected to attain to the state of *bittul ha-yesh*, the annihilation of somethingness, that is, the awareness that God alone is the true reality. . . . The Hasidic attitude to prayer is as an exercise in self-transcendence.⁹

Heschel is far closer to this Hasidic ideal than Buber. For Heschel, prayer is not an I-Thou relation between man and God but rather an effort to transcend the self, to become a thought of God. Prayer, for Heschel, is ultimately for the sake of the *Shekhinah*.

If Heschel's philosophical theology differs so decisively from Buber's I-Thou philosophy of existential dialogue, what is the philosophical framework of Heschel's theology?

In Louis Jacob's description of Hasidic prayer, he mentions the term "panentheism." "Panentheism" is the doctrine that all is in God. God is not simply identified with the totality of all things, as in pantheism. Rather, God includes yet transcends the world.

The chief exponent of philosophical panentheism today is Charles Hartshorne, the leading interpreter of Whiteheadian process philosophy in America. Hartshorne is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Texas in Austin. Hartshorne's great contribution to philosophy is his notion of the Divine perfection, enunciated in his book, *The Logic of Perfection*.¹⁰

Unlike the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who conceived of God's perfection as *actus purus*, pure act, as full and complete realization of value, Hartshorne delineates a different logic of perfection. Hartshorne's logic of perfection does not render God devoid of potentiality. On the contrary, Hartshorne's logic of perfection is based on the concept that God's being can be enriched by human values. According to Hartshorne, to conceive of the Deity as completely and totally actualized fails to make sense of the act of worship. If in worship we seek the greater glory of God, this implies that God is capable of being enriched by human values.

Like Heschel, Hartshorne takes seriously the act of worship. He defines perfection as the character God must have in order to make sense of the act of worship. Hartshorne contends that perfection is not compromised by richness of experience. Divine perfection need not be synonymous with simplicity, as Thomas Aquinas thought. In fact, Hartshorne maintains, becoming or process (implying that something can be added to the Divine experience, that the Deity is a growing God) is a more inclusive and dynamic category than the static category of being.

Therefore, process philosophy—the notion of God in constant *process* of becoming, a God who can be enriched by human worship—is a philosophical framework within which Heschel's major concept that God needs man can be integrated.

It is fascinating to note that Heschel's notion of man's becoming a thought of God in prayer is articulated in cosmic terms in Hartshorne's *Logic of Perfection*. Hartshorne explains:

The all-inclusiveness of the world-mind means, not that it is exalted above all suffering, but that no pain and no joy is beneath its notice. . . . Our deliberate acts set up currents, as

it were, in the mind of God, as the activities of our brain cells set up currents in our human minds. Each of us is a pulse in the eternal mind.¹¹

The objection most frequently raised against Heschel's theology, and Hartshorne's too, is that it is anthropomorphic. Hartshorne has an answer for this criticism. He is fond of quoting Goethe's dictum, "all thought is anthropomorphic." Theology is *man's* attempt to articulate the Divine transcendence. In so doing, man uses concepts. All concepts, even the most sublime, are human concepts. The more significant question, therefore, is: Which anthropomorphisms render greater justice to the Creator?

The best we can do theologically is to use metaphors of the Deity that reflect the best we know. All our theological statements, as Heschel said so poignantly, are under-statements, and are asymptotic to the infinity and mystery of God. But the best we know is the human mind—intellect, feeling and will. By extrapolation, our best hope is to conceive of God as the ideal synthesis of intellect, feeling and will. His essence is shrouded in mystery. But process philosophy shows that Heschel's concept of God's need for man is at least as tenable, philosophically, as the classical Greek concept of immutability and the medieval concept of Divine simplicity.

The test of a philosophical theology, for Heschel as for Hartshorne, is the act of prayer. *Just as the laboratory is the place where scientific theories are tested, the worship service is the crucible in which our religious ideas are verified.* "The test of an authentic theology," in the profound words of Abraham Joshua Heschel with which we began, "is the degree to which it reflects and enhances the power of prayer, the way of worship."¹²

We are forever and perennially indebted to the memory of our beloved teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, for giving us a theology of prayer which both enhances the state of our own souls and works, we trust, for the *tzorekh gavoah*, the greater glory of God.

NOTES

1. Abraham J. Heschel, "On Prayer," *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Fall, 1970.
2. Part I, *Asarah Maamarot*, p. 36b.
3. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy Of Religion*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc. 1951), pp. 241, 242.
4. *Genesis Rabbah*, 3:9. See also *Numbers Rabbah* 13:16. Cf. A. J. Heschel, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

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5. *Pesikta*, ed. Buber XXVI, 166b. See Heschel, *op.cit.*
 6. Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Scribner's, 1954), p. 10.
 7. Heschel, "Prayer as Discipline," in *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1966), p. 255.
 8. Arthur A. Cohen, *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew*, (New York: Behrman House, 1979), second revised edition, p. 169.
 9. Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, (New York: Schocken, 1972), p. 21.
 10. (Lasalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962).
 11. Hartshorne, *op.cit.*, p. 203.
 12. See Note 1 above.