

Three contributions to prayer

*In loving tribute to the
memory of Abraham Joshua Heschel*

EVERETT GENDLER

A Movo

Crises of faith are not unknown among theological students, and as I look back on my own days at Seminary, it seems to me that there were times when I must have been a classic case. Painful questions about God and prayer weighed heavily upon me for what seemed like years on end, although by calendrical calculation the acute periods were most likely days or weeks.

Seeking anonymity at such times lest my lack of faith become visible to others, especially faculty, I would eat whenever possible away from the Seminary. But there were days when I had to eat lunch in the Seminary cafeteria, which was frequented by faculty also. On those occasions I would slither into the cafeteria line, scurry through, gulp down the predictable fare, and make my escape, presumably unobserved by the Seeing Eyes of faculty, earthly representatives of that menacing, All-Seeing Eye referred to in Avot. In this fashion I managed to add physical indigestion to my already acute spiritual heartburn.

For a time this skulking about was an effective avoidance mechanism, but one day I was spotted by that astute reader not only of Hasidic texts but also of student spirits, Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose memory is indeed a blessing.

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"Tell me, my dear Everett, is something the matter?" he asked in that special Heschelian tone at once insinuating and inviting, an inflection reserved for those times when Sherlock Heschel, spiritual detective, was closing in upon a heretofore unapprehended spiritual suspect.

Oy! The evasion was at an end. I was both discovered and apprehended with a single question. So why pretend farther? Back to his book-lined office we went, where with both reluctance and immense relief I poured out my troubles in a flow of words that somewhat resembled the sputtering of a faucet fitfully transmitting water drawn from a well nearly dry.

After hearing me out, Heschel smiled sympathetically and knowingly, went to a bookcase, and took down from his collection of prayer books a particular siddur. Showing it to me, he said, "My dear Everett, get yourself a copy of *Siddur Otzar Hatefilot* and read there the Introduction to *Siddur Avodat Ha-Lev*. It will help, I assure you."

The ordeal over and the verdict rendered, I skeptically set out to comply with the prescription. To my inexpressible surprise it did help. The introduction to which Heschel referred me read as if written specifically to address my personal concerns. The author spoke in fresh ways about the place of petitionary prayer and the issue of the efficacy of prayer, precisely those problems that preoccupied me at that time of my life.

In succinct and scholarly fashion, the author rescued the root meaning of T'FI-LA, prayer, from its identification with supplication or asking, and he did it by referring to compelling instances of its biblical usage. He established that root meaning as a *clarifying* and *connecting*, a *judging* and *joining* of one's thoughts, impressions, and energies to Divine purpose as reflected in Scripture. He then assessed the significance of the fact that the Hebrew verb for praying occurs regularly in the HIT-PA-EL, the reflexive form. Here he suggested that prayer works its effects first through affecting the pray-er, hence the reflexive voice. The process he describes is neither "auto-suggestion" nor "self-hypnosis"; his process is far more profound, with cosmic connections and ties to the very texture of Created reality and the Creator.

This preface to prayer helped me then as it has helped me ever since. Perhaps it will help others as well. On the approach of Heschel's eighth yearzeit, in tribute to that beloved teacher and mystic, moralist and visionary, I'd like to share in translation some excerpts from one part of that Introduction.

"What Is Prayer?"
from
A Prayer Book for the Service of the Heart
by
Aryeh Leib ben Shlomo Gordon

In Rabbinic tradition the word T'FI-LA, prayer, is used as a synonym for T'CHI-NA, supplication, the asking of our needs from the Creator, Blessed be the Divine. But in Scripture we find it also used to denote the recital of praises of God.

And Hannah prayed, and said:
My heart exulteth in the Lord,
My horn is exalted in the Lord;
My mouth is enlarged over mine enemies;
Because I rejoice in Thy salvation.

—1 Samuel 2:1

And the Lord prepared a great fish to
swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the
belly of the fish three days and three
nights. Then Jonah prayed unto the
Lord his God out of the fish's belly.
And he said:

I called out of mine affliction
Unto the Lord, and He answered me;
Out of the belly of the nether-
world cried I,
And Thou heardest my voice.

—Jonah 2:1-3

Now after I had delivered the deed of
the purchase unto Baruch the son of
Neriah, I prayed unto the Lord, saying:
'Ah Lord God! behold, Thou hast made
the heaven and the earth by Thy great
power and by Thy outstretched arm;
there is nothing too hard for Thee;

—Jeremiah 32:16-17

... In all these instances there is only praise and adoration, and the Rabbinic usage is in fact an extension of the basic meaning.

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It appears to me that the root PLL in origin refers to the process of *sorting out* the confused mixture of thoughts and impressions which first present themselves to the mind. Appearing to the person in a confused state, they need to be sorted out and differentiated one from the other, sometimes by strict logic, sometimes by intuitive conjecture, the ones which more closely correspond to reality being thereby affirmed. For example:

And Israel said unto Joseph: 'I had not
thought to see thy face; and, lo, God
hath let me see thy seed also.'

—Genesis 48:11

Here LO PI-LAL-TI, "I had not thought," is used as a synonym for "I had not considered, I had not supposed." Had Israel used a more definite term, such as "I had never imagined" or "It never occurred to me," I would have inferred that he had already despaired completely of ever seeing Joseph again, and so had erased that hope from his heart. But in truth, contrary expectations were constantly struggling within him, and he could not reach an unambiguous decision. Hence the word LO PI-LAL-TI . . .

Another branch from the root PLL is PLH, to distinguish, to differentiate, used where an evident distinction is perceptible as well as conceptual. For example:

'And the Lord shall make a division
between the cattle of Israel and the
cattle of Egypt; and there shall nothing
die of all that belongeth to the
children of Israel.'

—Exodus 9:4

By contrast:

Ye shall therefore separate between the
clean beast and the unclean, and between
the unclean fowl and the clean; and ye
shall not make your souls detestable by
beast, or by fowl, or by any thing where
with the ground teemeth, which I have set
apart for you to hold unclean. And ye
shall be holy unto Me; for I the Lord am
holy, and have set you apart from the
peoples, that ye should be Mine.

—Leviticus 20:25-26

At that time the Lord separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, unto this day.

—Deuteronomy 10:8

In these cases the word used is related to HAV-DIL, the distinction being less immediately obvious and less tangible.

Prayer, then, T'FI-LA, is the *clarification* or *judging* of the thoughts and impressions which fill the human heart, the distinguishing of the worthy from the unworthy, and the *connecting* or *joining* of them to the Divine. . . . For this reason prayer is called "the service of the heart" (cf. Deuteronomy 11:13).

This is not an easy task for one not accustomed to it. Hence, "the early pietists spent one hour in silent waiting before they began their formal recitation of the prescribed service" (B'rachot 30b).

The sequence of worship is this: the worshipper first clarifies and sorts out the mixture of thoughts, impressions, and impulses within; next externalizes them in the presence of the Creator; then recites songs and praises of the Creator; and lastly, *if* he or she so desires, may conclude with some petition.

Since the very definition of prayer, T'FI-LA, is the clarification and connection of one's thoughts with the Divine, central to prayer is the proclaiming of God's glory, with petition clearly secondary and optional.

From this it follows also that a central pillar of prayer is the devotional direction of the heart: prayer without KA-VA-NA, the intent of the heart, is not true prayer.

And why does the verb "to pray," L'HIT-PA-LEL, always come in the reflexive, the HIT-PA-EL, denoting an activity of the agent which affects him/herself? Because prayer does not cause any change in the Will of the Creator . . . but rather works its effects within the worshipper as s/he offers heart and mind to the Creator. When the heart and mind of the worshipper change for the better through worship, by this change in the worshipper the worshipper's situation is also changed. . . .

For the Creator is ever ready to provide benefits for all creatures who walk in the right paths; such is the nature of the world God created. But humans often, through misdeeds, erect a barrier between themselves and their Creator, and so the flow of goodness

is blocked. But when they themselves remove this barrier through prayer, then of itself the flow resumes, and the worshipper experiences an elevation of spirit and becomes more receptive to the good.

In the words of Yehudah Halévi:

The Divine power is like the rain which waters the earth if the earth be fit to receive it.

—Kuzari III, 19

And in the words of Joseph Albo:

The mercies of God, Praised be the Name, are drawn by prayer unto the pray-er according to the ability of the pray-er to receive them.

—Ikkarim LV, 17

A Kavone for the K'dusha

By now our generation has seen quite a few "holy men," persons reputedly possessing special religious powers. Some are quite impressive and seem, indeed, charismatically endowed. Their personal presences are strongly felt, and one's attention is drawn to that endowment. For their gifts I am grateful, and may their numbers increase.

I have not, however, met many "holiness men," persons with a special capacity to direct one's attention to the dimension of the holy to be found throughout all of life. Heschel was one such, a "holiness man" par excellence, and for that I am especially grateful.

Not that he was without presence. Quite the contrary. As Dorothea Straus recalls, there was a "serenity in his dark eyes . . . his long white hair and a flowing beard . . . caused a participant at Selma to exclaim, 'Dere is de Lawd!'" (cf. "A Variety of Religious Experience" in *Showcases*).

Yet with Heschel such qualities were only momentarily the focus. He had a rare capacity to point with his very being toward that from which his own sense of K'dusha (holiness) flowed. I still remember vividly the experience, as a young seminary student, of taking an evening seminar with Heschel. Preparing as best I could

the—for me—difficult text, I entered the seminar room on the sixth floor of the seminary expecting that we'd immediately begin with textual discussion. Instead Heschel turned toward the window overlooking the seminary courtyard, looked outside at the darkening remnants of the light, turned toward us, and quietly announced: "Gentlemen, a great event happened a short while ago. The sun set. Were you aware of that? Did you notice?" And only after that introduction did he deign to direct our attention to the words before us.

Heschel's sense of the holy is, of course, superbly expressed in his writings. For me he stands in the company of Isaiah and William Blake. His reflections on the sublime, wonder, the mystery, awe and reverence, and the glory are classic, and offer new riches with each re-reading (cf. pp. 36-58 in *Between God and Man*, ed. Fritz Rothchild). Simply to read Heschel's words is to be stirred by the sense of K'dusha.

Yet to read about is still not to experience fully. It is by way of tribute to that special sensitivity that Heschel so freely and eagerly shared that I'd like to offer one possible kavannah (focus of attention) for the K'dusha of our own liturgy. To approach the K'dusha, centered about the words of Isaiah,

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory.

— Isaiah 6:3

I'd like to proceed in three stages: a brief word of theory; an application of the theory via an image; and a brief presentation of some supporting material from traditional sources.

The Theory

Israel Efros, in *Ancient Jewish Philosophy*, suggests that Kadosh, Holy, and Kavod, Glory, are two opposing concepts whose polar tension has determined the course of Jewish philosophy. K'dusha is the dynamic version of what in static philosophic terms we call transcendence: "Holiness tries to lift the God-idea ever above the expanding corporeal universe." Kavod is the dynamic version of what in static philosophic terms we call immanence: "Glory tends to bring the Creator ever nearer to man." K'dusha is "unapproachable because of ontological and ethical excellence"; Kavod is God's

craving "for the nearness of man . . . for the concrete." K'dusha is the far off, Kavod the near at hand; K'dusha is beyond our reach, Kavod is within our grasp.

The Application via the Image of the Sun

Since the K'dusha is recited only at morning and afternoon services (never at evening services), light naturally emanating from the sun is regularly available during its recitation. This invites some simple exercises.

1. If possible, place yourself in the rays of the sun. Feel the warmth.
2. Close your eyes lightly while facing the sun, and notice the amount of light that penetrates the eyelids.
3. Close the eyes more tightly. Light still penetrates, though less than before. (To check this, now cover the eyes with hands and notice the difference.)
4. Think further on this "immanence," this Kavod, as it were, of the sun. Notice how light and warmth from this far-off source penetrate and suffuse the body. And are not all warmth, all light, and all life on our planet directly or indirectly derived from this inflowing energy from the sun?
5. Consider now the sun in its "transcendent" aspect, out of reach, utterly destructive were one to come too near it, yet responsible, by its immanence, for all life on this planet. Is this not a precise symbolic representation of Kadosh and Kavod?
6. Now think further, drawing on astronomical knowledge concerning the number of suns in the number of planetary systems in our universe, etc. Think? Fantasy! Who can think such immensities?
7. Finally, try to imagine/fantasize/think of God/YHWY/the Divine standing in relation to all those suns as our sun stands in relation to our planet Earth. Such is the beginning of a sense of K'dusha, holiness!

Some Supporting Material from Traditional Sources

Are there traditional sources that would support such an interpretation? I believe there are. To cite but ten:

1. The association of Kadosh with transcendence

- a. "Kadosh" is repeated three times because of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is totally different (i.e., totally transcendent) from body, spirit, and even intelligence.

—"Etz Yosef" in *Otzar Hat'filot*, p. 325

- b. Why is "Kadosh" thrice repeated? To emphasize that YHWH is high and lifted up above this earthly world of activity, high and lifted up above the heavenly world of planets and constellations, high and lifted up above the world of pure intelligence.

—"Iyun T'filah" in *Otzar Hat'filot*, p. 267

- c. The first Kadosh refers to Keter/Chochma/Bina (the upper three sefirot); the second Kadosh refers to Hesed/G'vura/Tiferet (the intermediate three sefirot); the third Kadosh refers to, Netzach/Hod/Y'sod (the three sefirot just above our world of Malchut).

—*Siddur Bet Yaakov* of R. Jacob Emden, p. 61a

2. The association of Kavod with immanence

- a. "The whole earth is full of His glory," as in "and the earth did shine with His glory." (Ezekiel 43:2)

—Etz Yosef in *Otzar Hat'filot*, p. 267

Afterward he brought me to the gate, even the gate that looketh toward the east; and, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east; and His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth did shine with His glory.

—Ezekiel 43:1-2

- b. "The whole earth is full of His glory:" this is Malchut (the sefira of our world).

—*Siddur Bet Yaakov*, ibid.

- c. T. B. Kiddushin 31a and Berachoth 43b cite "The whole earth is full of His glory" in support of the rabbinic teaching that one must not walk "with stiff bearing or

haughty mien" for even four cubits lest he "push against the heels or feet of the Divine Presence," the latter being identified with Kavod or immanence.

3. The association of Kavod with light and sustenance

- a. Ezekiel 1:28

As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spoke.

- b. Exodus 24:17

And the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel.

- c. Exodus 16:7 (referring to the Mannah)

And in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the Lord; for that He hath heard your murmurings against the Lord; and what are we, that ye murmur against us?

- d. Finally, of course, and most widely known, are the verses from Psalm 19:

For the Leader. A Psalm of David.
The heavens declare the glory of God.
And the firmament sheweth His handiwork.

Here the association of Kavod, Glory, with the light is made explicit in verse 4, where reference is made to the sun:

There is no speech, there are no words,
Neither is their voice heard.
Their line is gone out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.
In them hath He set a tent for the sun,
Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,

And rejoiceth as a strong man to run his course.

And Heschel refers to this passage in his remarks on "The Glory."

At the same time, we must not *reduce* Glory to this numinous experience from the realm of nature. Equally a part of Biblical Kavod is justice in the human realm. Efros cites passages that illustrate such a connection, for example, Exodus 33:18-19, 34:6-7, and Numbers 14:19-21, where Kavod is associated with God's Thirteen Attributes and the compassionate involvement of the Divine in human history.

Holiness also at times has such a connotation. One of Heschel's favorite verses was

But the Lord of hosts is exalted through justice,
And God the Holy One is sanctified through righteousness.

There is clearly a connection among Holiness, Glory, and social justice.

Heschel lived this dimension, too. He was often seen marching on behalf of racial justice with his dear friend and colleague Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and just as often on behalf of the Vietnamese victims of destruction with his friend and colleague Father Daniel Berrigan. Heschel's was no limited aesthetic sense of Kavod, the numinous Glory. It penetrated the texture of the daily life of our society as well, demanding that all of life show recognition of the inexpressible preciousness of God's creation.

With the important qualification, then, that this particular Sun Kavannah be seen as but one facet of Kadosh-Kavod, not its entirety, I offer it for consideration. Perhaps awareness of the sun may give fuller life to Efros's exclamation: "And when Isaiah's Seraphim sing 'holy, holy, holy' and add 'the whole earth is full of His glory,' we hear the whole song of Israel containing both transcendence and immanence."

Has it any validity? The final test, surely, is neither theory nor proof texts but rather the experience of the worshipper in prayer. Perhaps in some small measure this kavannah will help increase our sense of K'dusha and Kavod, of holy and glorious wonder, of "the miracles that are daily with us."

Toward such an end, in loving memory of Dr. Heschel, it is intended.

A Niggun

For some years now I have been off and on fascinated by one particular hymn from the Shabbat morning service, CHAI O-LA-MIM, found in Sephardic and Hasidic prayer books. One of the hymns from "The Greater Hechalot," it is a powerful heaping of praises, alphabetically arranged, upon "The One Who Lives Forever."

Scholem talks about this Merkabah hymn and gives some background in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Second Lecture, Section 5). Needless to say, there is much to discuss, especially regarding its nonrational, numinous characteristics. This, however tempting it may be, is not what I want to deal with here.

Instead, I'd like to share a niggun, a melody that I find helps the words of the hymn gain more effective expression. The niggun presented itself as suitable for these words, and I have found it to be so. (The only problem is one of mil-el/mil-ra, ultimate/penultimate stress, but that strikes me as not major, and it can be corrected if one so wishes.)

And once again, though this time indirectly, the spirit of Heschel hovers, for he loved a niggun, appreciated a melody. To him singing was not incidental to the life of the spirit, it was essential:

We are losing the power of appreciation;
we are losing the ability to sing.

By singing Heschel did not mean simply vocalizing or the production of sound, however beautiful. Though he had a keen musical appreciation of the vocal art, he was more concerned with singing as the expression of spirits lifted high by the awareness and celebration of existence:

The meaning of existence is experienced
by moments of exaltation.

For Heschel, both a reward and a responsibility of being human was "quiet exaltation, capability for celebration," and he found this expressed in a phrase that Rabbi Akiba offered to his disciples:

A song every day,
A song every day.

(cf. Sanhedrin 99b)

ZE-MER B'CHOL YOM,
ZE-MER B'CHOL YOM.

A song every day;
A song every day.

It is in this spirit that the following niggun is offered, together with a transliteration of the Hebrew.



HA-A-DE-RET V' HA-E-MIL-NA L' CHAI O-LA-

MIM HA-BI-NA V' HA-B' RA-CHA L' CHAI O-LA-

MIM HA-GAA-VA V' HA-G' DU-LA L' CHAI O-LA

MIM HA-DE-A V' HA-DI-BUR L' CHAI O-LA MIM

Speaking into the silence

LYNN GOTTLIEB

These prayers come from the need to speak, praise, exult, lament, wail, rejoice, and thank the ever-present spirit of all being that continues to sustain us. Women are giving voice to the powerful emotions of prayer that for so long were not recorded or heard by the Jewish community. We are filling these occasions with words and stories that come from both oral and written traditions, as well as from our need to unite these words to our own experience of God.

Miriam's Song in the Wilderness

(taken from Numbers 12-13)

Miriam undergoes a crisis of spirit in the desert. After seeing her people leave the slavery of Egypt and come to the fiery mountain of truth, many people are still afraid of freedom and want to return to Egypt. This is too much to bear. Woman of the parting seas (Miriam) becomes bitter water woman (Mar yam) and takes herself to the desert for seven days of healing until she rediscovers God inside her. This piece is from Miriam's first day of healing in the wilderness.