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Edward A. Synan

ABRAHAM HESCHEL AND PRAYER

Our services are conducted with pomp and precision. The rendition of the liturgy is smooth. Everything is present: decorum, voice, ceremony. But one thing is missing: Life. One knows in advance what will ensue. There will be no surprise, no adventure of the soul; there will be no sudden burst of devotion. Nothing is going to happen to the soul. Nothing unpredictable must happen to the person who prays. He will attain no insight into the words he reads; he will attain no new perspective for the life he lives. Our motto is monotony.¹

SO Abraham Joshua Heschel, associate professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, addressing the 1953 convention of the Rabbinical Assembly of America, the association of Conservative rabbis, where his remarks caused considerable discussion. What vision of prayer so stirred a convention of twentieth-century American rabbis? Lest we think the question of interest only within the Jewish community, let us hasten to add that Heschel himself thinks otherwise: his address, lightly recast, constitutes a chapter of his *Man's Quest for God*,² and the doctrine on prayer he presented to the convention in Atlantic City differs not at all from that of his previously published essay *Man Is Not Alone*,³ a full-length presentation of his philosophy of religion.

THE ONTOLOGY OF PRAYER

IT IS primarily "the gift of addressing God"⁴ that defines man as Abraham Heschel sees him: an animal certainly, but an animal wielding

1. "The Spirit of Jewish Prayer," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America*, Fifty-Third Annual Convention, Atlantic City, N. J., June 22-27, 1953, Vol. XVII, pp. 151-152.

2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.

3. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951.

4. *Man's Quest for God*, p. 78.

awesome power. This beast can pray, and hence is not trapped within the limits of his own nature. Openness to God is the very being of man. "The possession of knowledge, wealth, or skill does not compose the dignity of man. A person possessing none of these gifts may still lay claim to dignity. Our reverence for man is aroused by something in him beyond his own and our reach, something that no one can deprive him of. It is his right to pray, his ability to worship, to utter the cry that can reach God: 'If . . . they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry' (Ex 22:22)."⁵

Prayer thrusts up from the deep soil of human nature itself, expresses the very being which man is; no accident, no hobby, prayer cannot be explained in categories borrowed from psychology or sociology. "To Judaism," Heschel writes, "the purpose of prayer is not to satisfy an emotional need. Prayer is not a need but an ontological necessity, an act that constitutes the very essence of man. He who has never prayed is not fully human."⁶

Heschel's man must pray in order to be faithful to what he *is*. He will pray in words, in places, at times, yet the merely spatial, the merely temporal, is never enough. More than an animal, not quite an angel, man wavers in uneasy equilibrium between two worlds, makes his prayer of the spirit in the word of the flesh. We live in a world in which we must act as well as pray, where our witness must be given to God, holy ordinances kept, commands fulfilled. Through our prayer we are all creatures' voice, the world finds a tongue to praise God.

All the ambivalence of the human marks prayer. Depths otherwise unsuspected are revealed in human nature through the act of prayer, yet prayer is not primarily an expression of man, as some moderns would have it. To assume so is either short-sighted or vainglorious, says Heschel; "the supreme goal of prayer is to express God . . . is self-attachment to what is greater than the self rather than self-expression."⁷

Prayer is a response to the divine questioning; it is also a response to the wonder provoked by the mystery of being. Where the Greeks constructed a philosophy, Heschel would have us pray. "To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that ani-

5. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

mates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. . . . Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great."⁸ But as the philosophy of the Greeks, rising in wonder and for that reason disinterested, is an ontology precisely because it contemplates being, so Heschel sees the prayer of the believer as an ontology in a new dimension, inaccessible to intellect: disinterested, inexpedient, necessary. "It is hard to define religion; it is hard to place its wealth of meaning into the frame of a single sentence. But surely one thing may be said negatively: religion is not expediency. . . . Of all things we do prayer is the least expedient, the least worldly, the least practical. This is why prayer is an act of self-purification. This is why prayer is an ontological necessity."⁹

THE POLARITY OF PRAYER

IS THE real a crossroads of apparent contradiction? More than one philosopher has thought so. Thus Heschel has found prayer a nest of paradox: God and man, spontaneity and fidelity to a text, prayer and life. And if the philosophers have littered the world with dialectics intended to restore wounded unity, Heschel binds up all in a doctrine of "polarity."

1. *God—Man.* The human and the divine are the termini of the event which is a prayer: however humble its beginning, this bowshot arches into God. "Neither the lips nor the brain are the limits of the scene in which prayer takes place," Heschel writes. "What goes on in our heart is a humble preliminary to an event in God."¹⁰

Prayer is a process, ontological; man prays and becomes open to the Presence he could evade, the Presence which will not intrude itself upon him. "Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives, to let His will prevail in our affairs; it is the opening of a window to Him in our will, an effort to make Him the Lord of our soul."¹¹ "God is not alone when discarded by man. But man is alone,"¹² suffering a profound malaise because he has blocked Him off. It is in prayer,

8. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

9. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Heschel tells us, that this mischief is undone, that man can unfold before the Lord: "Prayer is confidence, unbosoming oneself to God. For man is incapable of being alone."¹³

Although prayer heals the loneliness of man without God, for Heschel the intention of prayer is always outside man and his needs: if these are incidentally fulfilled, if, when he prays, man profits so to speak in passing, so much the better—but the principle remains unchanged: "the focus of prayer is not the self. . . . It is the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. . . . Thus, in beseeching Him for bread, there is one instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger nor to food, but to His mercy. This instant is prayer. We start with a personal concern and live to feel the utmost."¹⁴

To Heschel, therefore, prayer is by no means co-terminous with the effort to pray: only the apex of that surge, a point which is experienced as unextended no matter how prolonged—this is the razor's edge of prayer, a kind of Bergsonian intensity—"the yielding of the entire being to one goal, the gathering of the soul into focus."¹⁵ We may ask for bread, God might even grant it, but, for Heschel, neither request nor this mercy—which to him is no answer to prayer, as we shall see—is precisely prayer. Not a cause, not a source, this interplay takes place on the side lines of prayer: in Heschel's terminology, it is a "motive." A man may come to pray because of suffering, "but suffering is not the source of prayer. A motive does not bring about an act as a cause produces an effect; it merely stimulates the potential into becoming an actuality. Peril or want may clear the ground for its growth, stubbing up the weeds of self-assurance, ridding the heart of the hard and obdurate, but it can never raise prayer."¹⁶

So little utilitarian is prayer that Heschel excludes on principle the possibility of an "answer" to prayer, at least in the natural order. All his mountains are immovable:

When a vessel sails into a typhoon and the maw of the boiling maelstrom opens to engulf the tottering prey, it is not the pious man, en-

13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

grossed in supplication, but the helmsman who intervenes in the proper sphere with proper means, fighting with physical tools against physical powers. What sense is there in imploring the mercy of God? Words do not stem the flood, nor does meditation banish the storm. Prayer never entwines directly with the chain of physical cause and effect; the spiritual does not interfere with the natural order of things.¹⁷

Heschel is acutely aware that without faith, prayer would be one more evidence of the absurdity which would associate God and man, trap the transcendent in a net of immanence. If God is the supreme Being, what concern of His whether we be religious or not? What have we to offer a God who is infinite? Certainly we are capable of ignoring God: is it not presumptuous to suggest that God does not ignore us? Faith which implies a concern of God for man is nonsense, the rationalists go on, and there is no prayer without faith. Like King Achaz, they will not be as bold as believers, will not expect signs from the great God; thinking themselves reverent, they will not presume to propose themselves as partners in a work which engages Him. But the believer, for all his holy temerity, is the truly reverent: "When we begin to feel a qualm of diffidence lest we hurt what is holy . . . He answers with love our trembling awe. Repentant of forgetting Him even for a while, we become sharers of gentle joy; we would like to dedicate ourselves forever to the unfoldment of His final order."¹⁸

The man of prayer knows over what abyss of sanctity he hovers. For Heschel there is no presumption in prayer. The man who prays is not even in quest of a knowledge of God. True enough, it may be that our knowledge will be deepened by the practice of prayer, but this is not its goal.

Prayer is not thinking. To the thinker, God is an object; to the man who prays, He is the subject. Awaking in the presence of God, we strive not to acquire objective knowledge, but to deepen the mutual allegiance of man and God. What we want is not to know Him, but to be known to Him; not to form judgments about Him, but to be judged by Him; not to make the world an object of our mind, but to let the world come to His attention, to augment His, rather than our knowledge. We endeavor to disclose ourselves to the Sustainer of all, rather than to enclose the world in ourselves.¹⁹

17. *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 239.

18. *Man's Quest for God*, p. 5.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Indeed Heschel goes further yet: not only does he disclaim the possession of a concept adequate to the divine reality, he confesses that he is not really sure whether he serves God at all.

What is God? An empty generality? An alibi? Some kind of an idea that we develop? I have been wrestling with the problem all my life as to whether I really mean God when I pray to Him, whether I have even succeeded in knowing what I am talking about and whom I am talking to. I still don't know whether I serve God or I serve something else. . . . We Jews have no concepts; all we have is faith, faith in His willingness to listen to us. We have no information, but we sense and believe in His being near to us. Israel is not a people of definers of religion but a people of witnesses to His concern for man. . . . He is a reality, in the face of which, when becoming alive to it, all concepts become clichés.²⁰

Man's passivity in the very core of prayer is such that he is no longer a thinking subject; delivered into the power of the Ineffable, the more he empties himself the more he is filled with God and the more God carries on the act of prayer in man, so that Heschel can call prayer "the reflection of the Divine intentions in the soul of man. . . . To pray is to dream in league with God, to envision His holy visions."²¹

2. *Spontaneity—Continuity.* The manifestation of the polarity of prayer which most concerns Heschel is that between *kavanah*, "inner participation," "inner devotion," and *keva*, the "fixed text," the "liturgy." It is around this problem that his address to the rabbinical meeting in 1953 revolves, and his treatise on prayer, *Man's Quest for God*, supplies us with a rapid survey of his doctrine: spontaneity—*kavanah*—it is the goal of prayer; continuity—*keva*—it is the way to that goal.²² Heschel's analysis of this polarity proceeds under the caution that the absolute contrast between *kavanah* and *keva* exists only in abstraction. His problem is not how to understand a basic and objective opposition, rooted in a contradictory order of natures, but rather how to preserve a correct emphasis in worship.

Inner devotion is unquestionably prior in dignity for Heschel; without it there can be no prayer.²³ He underwrites without reservation the Aristotelian conception that what is sought for its own sake is more noble than what is sought for the sake of something else, and holds

20. *Proceedings*, p. 214.

21. *Man's Quest for God*, p. 19.

22. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 12, 35.

that the liturgy, with its texts and traditions, has no other reason for existence than that it buttresses our human failings, our wandering attention, our limited individual resources in prayer. Hence the tradition of centuries is not to be jettisoned, Heschel stresses, and he takes this decision in the name of inner devotion. Far from destroying that sense of the Ineffable which is prayer, the liturgy directs and fixes the attention of the understanding, kindles the heart: "Ability to express what is hidden in the heart is a rare gift. . . . The words are often the givers, and we the recipients. They inspire our minds and awaken our hearts. . . . It is the liturgy that teaches us what to pray for."²⁴

Granted that the polarity of spontaneous inner devotion and the continuity guaranteed by a fixed text are complementary elements in the surge of man to God, is there not an irreducible opposition lurking beneath their reconciliation? The text, after all, is a thing dead and static; the man of prayer a person. To this Heschel replies: "It takes two things to make prayer come to pass: a person and a word. . . . A word detached from the person is numb; a person detached from the word is illiterate. The very essence of prayer is in a blending of the two."²⁵ Hence Heschel has small sympathy with a merely mechanical or "symbolic" view of languages; "words," he tells us, "are not made of paper." And wherein does the vital power of the word reside? In this, that the word is a commitment. It is in our power to pronounce or to withhold the word; once it has gone forth, "it is a reality . . . something existing for itself."²⁶

3. *Prayer—Life.* There runs through Heschel's work an aversion for the view which would so divide life that prayer should become one activity among others: "To [the prophets of Israel] the totality of human activities, social and individual, of all inner and external circumstances, is the divine sphere of interest. The domain of the Torah is therefore all of life, the trite as well as the sacred."²⁷ How could prayer, then, escape entering into the whole of life? If prayer reflects the very being of man, and if—as Heschel holds, with Judaism—the being of man is what God wants it to be, unmarred by any original sin, then life and worship ought to be co-terminous; the time to pray

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

27. *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 270.

is indeed "all the time."²⁸ From an ontological point of view, life apart from prayer is inhuman; it will be as little human ethically. Though no substitute for action, prayer must blossom into action and without prayer action will be a rank growth: "Prayer is the essence of spiritual living. . . . On the globe of the microcosm the flow of prayer is like the Gulf Stream, imparting warmth to all that is cold, melting all that is hard in our life."²⁹

QUESTIONS

WHAT estimate of this striking doctrine imposes itself upon a Catholic reader? If words reveal anything about the one who speaks them, Heschel has not merely thought about prayer; he is a man of prayer.

As to the conception that prayer is rooted in the being of man, that the ontological situation of our race demands the response called prayer—it must be insisted that up to this point Heschel is right. Prayer is not an option. It is a privilege, no doubt, but it is also a necessity if man is to be faithful to the hierarchy of being which he knows. How far conceptual knowledge will take man in this direction might be debated; certainly we do not now see God face to face, rather through a mirror, obscurely—when all is said, He is the Incomprehensible. Heschel insists on the negative character of our grasp of the ineffable God so strongly, however, that in principle it would seem that for him no theology remains possible at all. But, inadequate though our concepts of God be, they are true; when Heschel says that in the face of God's reality "all concepts become clichés," he falls into a trap of his own making. Yet, in whatever way we have become aware of God and to whatever point we know Him, no Catholic will deny that the ultimate reason for prayer is that there is a Being whereas we are but beings.

But there is a disturbing theme which recurs in Heschel's reflections on the necessity for prayer. Has some blindness of mine missed in Heschel a just estimate of human weakness, of a nature so wounded that only grace can heal it? We Catholics are wayfarers even while we pray; has Heschel's man already arrived? And are we truly above

28. *Man's Quest for God*, p. 33.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

bringing our need to our worship? Is it really true, as Heschel holds, that when we pray our needs are only incidentally fulfilled, that our petitions are answered only in the sphere of the spirit? I cannot help saying that here he is not faithful to his people's glorious tradition. Was it only incidental when Israel prevailed over Amalek so long as Moses lifted up his hands to implore God's help (Ex 17:8-13)? Did Elijah violate the spirit of prayer when he cast himself on the earth and begged for rain (3 Kg 18:41-45)? In excluding the prayer of petition, I am afraid Heschel shortens the hand of God. It is making an idol of the laws of nature to think of them as if they, and not God, ruled His world. And it is not only unbiblical but also unscientific to allow God no "interference" in the natural order of things, as if the universe were forever closed, as if He had lost the key to the house He had built.

Worse yet, in Heschel's theology, God "needs" us. In some way God is said to benefit by our prayers; His knowledge is "augmented"—He comes to know us, the world enters the orbit of His intention. No "dialogue," prayer is a device for a kind of expansion of God.³⁰ Difficult to think that here Heschel's pen has not somewhat outrun his intent, that his delight in the freshly minted term has not led him to strike off what may be no coin at all. Are such expressions tolerable? Is there some sense in which they do not diminish the full independence of God? Perhaps; for he says: "God is in need of man for the attainment of His ends. . . . God is a partner and a partisan in man's struggle for justice, peace and holiness, and it is because of His being in need of man that He entered a covenant with him for all time. . . . His need is a self-imposed concern. God is now in need of man, because He freely made him a partner in His enterprise."³¹

Heschel writes and argues with the power of a poet. If he will not object to my pedestrian rhetoric—must he not simply say "yes" to the proposition "God is beyond all need and profit; He has created us

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 12. This suggestion that prayer is not a dialogue with God is accompanied by a note of Heschel's referring to St. Clement of Alexandria. But he is not the only one who has described prayer as a dialogue; many of the Church's Fathers and mystics use like terms. Among others, there is St. Ignatius of Loyola, who in his *Spiritual Exercises* gives a special place to "colloquy . . . speaking [to God] exactly as one friend speaks to another or as a servant speaks to a master" (trans. by Louis J. Puhl, S.J.; Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1951, p. 28). St. Teresa of Avila exclaims: "Oh! If only I could describe how the soul holds intercourse with this Companion, the Holy of Holies" (*Way of Perfection*, XXIX, 3).

31. *Man Is Not Alone*, pp. 241-243.

freely to share His blessedness"?³² There is no need to belabor the fact that for a Jewish theologian it is not permissible to say that God has entered our world in *the* Incarnation. Is it too harsh to suggest that the Law and the Prophets have made Heschel aware of God's intention to be in the world of men, and that his terminology is witness to an uneasiness with a world where God must be but where, according to Heschel, He must not walk in flesh, must not even outrage nature by miracles? This is Heschel's world, to be sure; is it the world of Abraham, of the burning bush? Was Isaiah so chary of "signs"?

Not everyone who profits by miracles must first believe in them; the murmuring multitudes were not denied water in the desert. Abraham Heschel is surely a man concerned with prayer; better yet, he is persuaded that in prayer there may be surprises, adventures of the soul, something unpredictable. He is right. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has never hesitated to shatter our preconceptions with blessings we could not foresee. "We live through one of the great hours of history," Heschel himself writes. "The false gods are crumbling, and the hearts are hungry for the voice of God. But the voice has been stifled. To recapture the echo, we must be honest in our willingness to listen, we must be unprejudiced in our readiness to understand."³³

32. A Catholic too may speak of the divine need for man. But how he does it is shown by Pius XII who, in his encyclical on the Mystical Body, teaches that Christ the Head needs the Church His Body, that He requires His members, not from any poverty or weakness, rather from the infinite fullness of His strength and love (N.C.W.C. edition, section 44, pp. 27-28).

33. *Man's Quest for God*, p. xiii.