

Prayer: What Are We Doing?

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Less Ego, More God:

**R. Abraham Joshua Heschel in Conversation with Hasidic Masters and
Christian Mystics on the Spiritual Project of Prayer**

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“The greatest beauty grows at the greatest distance from the ego” (*God in Search of Man*)

I The Two Pulls We All Feel

A) *God in Search of Man*, p. 397

There is... a perpetual tension in man between the focus of the self and the goal that lies beyond the self... Animal in man is driven to concentrate on the satisfaction of needs; spiritual in man is the will to serve higher ends, and in serving ends he transcends his needs.

B) *Man is Not Alone*, p. 146

We are attached to two centers: to the focus of our self and to the focus of God. Driven by two forces, we have both the impulse to acquire, to enjoy, to possess and the urge to respond, to yield, to give.

C) *Man is Not Alone*, pp. 137-138

A man entirely unconcerned with his self is dead; a man exclusively concerned with his self is a beast... Human is he who is concerned with other selves.

II Prayer and Self-Transcendence

Man's Quest for God

D) Religion is not expediency... Of all the things we do prayer is the least expedient, the least worldly, the least practical (p. xiii).

E) We all suffer from an egocentric predicament... It is precisely the function of prayer to overcome that predicament...The essence of prayer lies in man's self-transcending (pp. 56-57, 15).

F) We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the center or living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. God is the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source, and we are the flowing of His force, the ebb and flow of His tides.

Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. For when we betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of the ego, we can behold a situation from the aspect of God. (p. 7)

G) The focus of prayer is not the self... [Prayer] comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. Feeling becomes prayer in the moment in which we forget ourselves and become aware of God. When we analyze the consciousness of a supplicant, we discover that it is not concentrated upon his own interests, but on something beyond the self. The thought of personal need is absent, and the thought of divine grace alone is present in his mind. 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. (p. 15)

H) In Jewish liturgy praise rather than petition ranks foremost. It is the more profound form, for it involves not so much the sense of one's own dependence and privation as the sense of God's majesty and glory (pp. 63-64).

I) Merold Westphal, "Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self," in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds., *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, p. 14.

We can distinguish praise from thanksgiving as follows: to give thanks is to praise God for the good things I have received from God, while to praise God is to thank God for who God is, for what Luther calls God's 'bare goodness,' considered without reference to how I may benefit from it.

J) Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 94

The unitive knowledge of God in love is not a knowledge of an object by a subject, but a far different and transcendent kind of knowledge in which the created 'self' which we are seems to disappear in God and to know him alone... The self undergoes a kind of emptying and an apparent destruction until, reduced to emptiness, it no longer knows itself apart from God.

K) Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, p. 122.

Self-realization in this true religious sense is... less an awareness of ourselves than an awareness of the God to whom we are drawn in the depths of our being. We become real, and experience our actuality, not when we pause to reflect upon our

own self as an isolated individual entity, but rather when, transcending ourselves and passing beyond reflection, we center our whole soul upon the God Who is our life. That is to say we fully 'realize' ourselves *when we cease to be conscious of ourselves in separateness* and know nothing but the one God Who is above all knowledge.

III Covenant and Duality

L) Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. II, pp. 144, 137

Prophecy is a confrontation. God is God, and man is man; the two may meet, but never merge. There is a fellowship, but never a fusion... Prophetic consciousness is marked by a shuddering sense of the unapproachable holiness of God. The prophet knows there is a chasm that cannot be bridged, a distance that cannot be conquered.

M) Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (trans. Walter Kaufmann), p. 126

What has to be given up [in any authentic encounter] is not the I, as most mystics suppose: the I is indispensable for any relationship, including the highest, which always presupposes an I and You. What has to be given up is not the I but that false drive for self-affirmation which impels man to flee from the unreliable, unsolid, unlasting, unpredictable, dangerous world of relation into the having of things

IV Letting God in

N) Heschel, "Prayer as Discipline," *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 258.

God is in exile; the world is corrupt. The universe itself is not at home. To pray means to bring God back into the world, to establish His kingship for a second at least. To pray means to expand His presence... To worship, therefore, means to make God immanent, to make Him present. His being immanent in the world depends upon us. When we say, 'Blessed be He,' we extend His glory, we bestow His spirit upon the world.

O) "On Prayer," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pp. 258, 259, 260, 259

Prayer is disclosing or at least preventing irreversibly concealing. God is ensconced in mystery, hidden in the depths. Prayer is pleading with God to come out of the depths... To pray is to open a door, where both God and soul may enter. Prayer is arrival, for Him and for us... Our task is... to enable Him to enter our moments, to be at home in our time... To pray is to overcome distance, to shatter screens...to heal the break between God and the world.

P) "The Vocation of the Cantor," *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 244-245.

It is the task of man to reveal what is concealed; to be the voice of glory, to sing its silence, to utter, so to speak, what is in the heart of all things. The glory is here—invisible and silent. Man is the voice; his task is to be the song... In singing we perceive what it otherwise beyond perceiving.