

Know Before Whom You Stand: Where Worship Begins and Continues *Rabbi Stuart Dauermann, PhD*

It is difficult for a literate 21st century Rabbi to speak about worship and what it means to know and serve the God of Israel without referencing Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), who was one of the most impressive and prophetic figures of the 20th century Jewish world, unlike many Rabbis. However, he was respected in all branches of Judaism, but not the Jewish world alone. At the request of Augustine Cardinal Bea, he presented a crucial memorandum on behalf of the Jewish people that greatly affected deliberations at that time, and resulted in the promulgation of the history-making document *Nostra Aetate* that reversed the course of 2000 years of ecclesiastical anti-Semitism. Heschel was also beloved by Protestants like Richard Niebuhr, and by Dr. Martin Luther King, with whom he marched at Selma, Alabama. At that time, Heschel said, “I felt like my feet were praying.” He was a man rightly described and remembered as “great.”

In speaking of what it means to worship God, to pray to Him, Heschel comments on the well-known Jewish phrase, “Know before whom you stand.” There are several versions of this Hebrew sentence. In the plural it is found in the Talmud (B’rachot 28b).

In this brief meditation, I intend to summarize some of what he says, adding comments of my own. Heschel’s thoughts are taken from essays in *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism From the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, edited by Fritz A. Rothschild.

Heschel reminds us that the spiritual minimum of worship, which in Jewish life is most often termed “prayer,” is an act of the consciousness of man: “Know before whom you stand.” This knowledge is not a conclusion based on intellectual processes, but is rather “the art of sensing His Presence in our daily lives.”

The precondition to being a worshipper is the sense that one has encountered Something, or rather Someone beyond the normal realm of human experience, an encounter inspiring awe—the awareness of having encountered the Presence of the Wholly Other.

Years ago I knew a woman who had spent about forty years sarcastically batting away the arguments offered by religious zealots seeking to win her to the life of faith. Nothing penetrated her, and each argument only left her more convinced that religious people were simply crazy. All of that changed when she attended a service where I was also present, and where she sensed the presence of God. His presence was in fact so real to her

at that time that it breached all of her defenses. At that moment, for the first time in her adult life, she became a candidate for worship: she had encountered the Wholly Other. She knew her life was being lived out.

The “whom” before whom we stand is not a what, not a force, not a thing. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber taught us to conceive of this encounter as “I-Thou” rather than “I-It,” and he was right. Heschel reminds us that, “If God is a what, a power, the sum total of values, how can we pray to it? An ‘I’ does not pray to an ‘it.’ Unless, therefore, God is at least as real as my own self is: unless I am sure that God has at least as much life as I do, how can I pray?” And of course Heschel is right: in prayer, in worship, we stand in the presence of the One who is infinitely greater than all. We sense that in encountering him, we enter a realm where all other realities are downsized.

But what of the “standing” aspect of our phrase, “Know before whom you stand?” What does that refer to? It refers to the posture of a slave. A slave stands in the presence of his master, just as a subject stands in the presence of his king. And we are indeed both slaves and subjects of the King of Kings. We stand in His presence out of respect and acknowledgement that He deserves our complete respect and obedience. Again, Heschel reminds us, “What marks the act of prayer is the decision to enter and face the presence of God. To pray means to expose oneself to Him, to His judgment” [212].

This last statement is especially relevant to Jews at this time of year as we come to the High Holy Days, which are a dress rehearsal for the Final Judgment. At this time we stand in the presence of God knowing that someday we will have to give him a full accounting of how we had lived our lives. It is meant to be a sobering time, a time when a person stands in judgment over himself. In fact, the verb “to pray” in Hebrew, “*hitpallel*” means just that. It means to assess or to judge oneself. During this time of year, above all others, we are obliged to “Know before whom we stand.”

There is also a phrase the Church uses to express this idea. The phrase is *Coram Deo*. It captures the idea of Christians living in the presence of, under the authority of, and to the honor and glory of God.

Let this slogan, “Know before who you stand,” and the phrase “Coram Deo” remind you of the one whom you have encountered, who calls us to live our lives under his authority, and to his honor and glory. **It is in only by nurturing this awareness that we can be said to truly worship God.**

Shalom.