

Four Lessons on Jewish Prayer for All the People of God

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When speaking to the woman at the well, Yeshua (Jesus) tells her what God seeks in our day: "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers" (John 4:23). Ultimately God is not seeking believers, nor even workers for the harvest, although He does seek these as well. Above all else, the Father is seeking worshippers. And contrary to those who imagine that Jewish worship is secondary or even suspect, Yeshua said this: "We worship what we know, for salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

Bearing this in mind, let's talk about some characteristics of Jewish worship. The italicized quotations that follow are some thoughts from our great teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of Blessed Memory.

He tell us that, *"Praise is our first response. Aflame with inability to say what His presence means, we can only sing, we can only utter words of adoration."* When one comes into the presence of God, all petitions flee, all self-concerns fall away at first, as we are taken up in contemplation of the Holy One. We are overcome with the awareness of who it is we are approaching. The Psalter reminds us, "Enter His gates with thanksgiving; Come into his courts with praise." Remember, He is the King of Kings, The Lord of Lords. The Sovereign over all that is. "It is fitting for the upright to praise him."

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: "Through him (Yeshua), therefore, let us offer God a sacrifice of praise continually. For this is the natural product of lips that acknowledge his name [Hebrews 13:15].

Heschel further reminds us that there are two fundamental kinds of prayer. He says it this way:

"We have to distinguish between two main types of prayer: prayer as an act of expression and prayer as an act of empathy.

The first type comes to pass when we feel the urge to set forth before God a personal concern. Here the concern, even the mood and the desire to pray come first; the word follows. It is the urge to pray that leads to the act of praying. This is the prayer of expression.

For the person who has learned to orient himself or herself to God, this prayer of expression is reflexive. I think of the Carmelite, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (c. 1614 – 12 February 1691) whose thoughts were compiled into a classic text, *Practicing the Presence of God*. He disciplined himself to continually orient himself to the Divine Presence even amidst the most mundane of tasks, bringing to him every petition as a matter of intimate conversation. Of late I have come to compare such prayer to the

relationship one might have with a friend with whom has frequent, even daily, long telephone conversations. All the rest of life happens meanwhile while that conversation continues, or conversely, amidst that conversation, life happens, and we comment on it, reporting on our lives to the person on the other end. So it is can be with us and God in the prayer of expression—we talk to him, even continually, about what is on our heart.

The 17-18th century Hasidic Rebbe, Nachman of Bratslav counseled his disciples to spend one hour every day talking to God in their own language, crying out to him, sharing with him their concerns, as a child does with one's parent. He called this *hitbodedut* (*hit-BOW-d'-doot*), meaning voluntary self seclusion. This too is the prayer of expression.

Heschel then turns to a second modality of prayer which should be of special interest to Roman Catholics, but has for millennia been the norm in Jewish life, and that is liturgical prayer. Here is what Heschel says:

The more common type of prayer is an act of empathy. There need be no prayerful mood in us when we begin to pray. It is through our reading and feeling the words of the prayers, through the imaginative projection of our consciousness into the meaning of the words, and through empathy with the ideas with which the words are pregnant, that this type of prayer comes to pass. Here the word comes first, the feeling follows.

In the prayer of empathy, we begin by turning to the words of the liturgy. At first, the words and their meanings seem to lie beyond the horizon of the mind. . . . Gradually, going out to meet its meaning, we rise to the greatness of prayer. On the way to the word, on its slopes and ridges, prayer matures—we purify ourselves into beings who pray.

So for today we have four lessons to enrich our practice of prayer.

1. God is seeking worshipers.
2. When we approach God we should do so with praises and thanksgiving on our lips.
3. Surely we will often approach God with the prayer of expression, telling God what is on our hearts and minds.
4. But also, we should avail ourselves of the prayer of empathy, letting the liturgy draw us into its world, lifting us up to heights we would never attain if left unaided.

All praise to Him to Whom all praise is due.