

Rabbi Shai Held

Mechon Hadar

Less Ego, More God:

Abraham Joshua Heschel on Prayer and Self-Transcendence

1) *Man's Quest for God*, p. 7

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 of 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.

2) *Man's Quest*, p. 15

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.

3) Merold Westphal, "Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self," in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, ed.s, *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, 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.

4) Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. II, p. 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.

5) 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

6) Heschel, "Prayer as Discipline," *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 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.

7) Heschel, "The Vocation of the Cantor," *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 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 is otherwise beyond perceiving.