

The Supernatural, Social Justice and Spirituality

Gilah Kletenik

10/16/20082008

“Spirituality,” can we even begin to know what that means? The term is vague and even intimidating. For some though, this isn’t even a question. They think of the exuberant chuckling of a devoted worshipper or the ecstatic singers around the *Rebbe*. Others are inspired by nature’s breathtaking beauty, while many, in earnest, turn to yoga and meditation. I have been surprised to find that my moments of greatest spiritual uplift come when I least expect them to; while lobbying on behalf of sex slaves, protesting genocide in Darfur and volunteering with the homeless. Obviously, it is a *mitsvah* to perform deeds of this nature; still, these are curious instances to feel the Divine. What stands behind these flashes of the other worldly?

A good portion of the Torah deals with sacrifice. In fact, the primary means of worship and connection to God used to be through sacrifice. Temple service was once the nation’s channel to God, its spiritual stream to heaven. Interestingly though, this method of relating to the Lord is not always presented in the most idyllic terms. Instead, the prophets repeatedly chastise the Jews for sacrificing from empty, evil hearts: “For I desire acts of loving-kindness, not sacrifice, acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.”¹ Hosea’s rebuke of the people links morality with spirituality. His demand of the Jews that they abandon their meaningless sacrifices and instead recognize God by acting decently, establishes a firm connection between just action and service of the Almighty. This correlation is emphasized by Rabbi Dostai the son of Rabbi Yannai who taught: “whoever gives even a penny to a beggar merits and receives the Divine presence, as it is written, ‘I through an act of righteous giving will behold your face’ (Psalms 17).”² The relationship between the service of man and the service of Heaven is clear. What stands behind this connection?

“Rabbi Hama the son of Rabbi Hanina said, what is the meaning of the text: ‘You shall walk after the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 8:5)? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the *Shekhinah*? For has it not been said: ‘For the Lord your God is a devouring fire’ (Deuteronomy 4:24)? But the meaning of the verse is to teach you to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: ‘And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them (Genesis 3:21),’ so you should also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: ‘And the Lord appeared unto him [Abraham, just after he had been circumcised] by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1),’ so you should also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: ‘And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son (Genesis 25:11)’ so you should also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: ‘And He buried him [Moses] in the valley (Deuteronomy 34:6)’ so you should also bury the dead.”³

The teaching of Rabbi Hama suggests that acting morally is a fulfillment of *imitatio dei*, a notion that Maimonides emphasizes in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides interprets God's response to Moses' request of "show me now Your ways,"⁴ as a commandment from God to imitate His attributes as expressed in the thirteen principles: "He means that it is My purpose that there should come from you loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment in the earth ... with regard to the thirteen principles: namely that the purpose should be assimilation to them and that this should be our way of life."⁵

While this approach to justice and morality is inspiring, it invites the question, why? Why is God so concerned with justice here on earth and why are we part of this concern, charged with imitating Heaven? Abraham Joshua Heschel addresses this question: "righteousness is not just a value; it is God's part of human life, *God's stake in human history* ... For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man. Justice is not an ancient custom, a human convention, a value, but a transcendent demand, freighted with divine concern. It is not only a relationship between man and man, it is an *act* involving God, a divine deed."⁶ To Heschel, the imperative to uphold justice is not merely to imitate God; it is to partner with Him, to be Godlike.

This notion of teaming-up with God is rooted in Lurancic Kabbalah's conception of creation through *tsitsum* and *shevirat ha-keilim*. In order to conceive of the world, God had to constrict his infinite nature through *tsitsum*, thereby generating space for the work of His hands. But, God, after creating the universe, was unable to leave it empty of His presence, so He emanated His glory through rays, which were too intense and invariably shattered, scattering throughout the world – *shevirat ha-keilim*. The duty of man in Luria's mystical philosophy is to harvest these shards and repair them, *li-takken olam*.⁷ And, while Luria perhaps did not initially link *tikkum olam* with morality, looking around the world its hard not to connect his conception of brokenness and the need for repair with our *Tanakh* imperative "justice, justice shall you pursue."⁸ Even Bob Dylan has expressed this vision of broken vessels and social injustice: "Broken lines, broken strings. Broken threads, broken springs. Broken idols, broken heads. People sleeping in broken beds ... Streets are filled with broken hearts. Broken words never meant to be spoken, Everything is broken ... Broken voices on broken phones. Take a deep breath, feel like you're chokin', Everything is broken."⁹

The Jewish call to justice is not merely a suggestion or even a commandment; it's a responsibility, a service of heaven. "Judaism is the guardian of an ancient but still compelling dream. To heal where others harm, mend where others destroy, to redeem evil by turning its negative energies to good: these are the mark of the ethics of responsibility, born in the radical faith that God calls on us to exercise our freedom by becoming his partners in the work of creation."¹⁰

When we fundraise to free slaves in the developing world or fight for workers' rights in New York, we are not only emulating God, we are joining the Divine, becoming Heavenly. Whereas with prayer and study we strive to reach the Lord, when we uphold justice we work with God. Nature might give us that sense of the ineffable, but moral acts bridge the gap between us and the Supernatural. Meditation and contemplation are a turning inwards, but concern for the other is not only a recognition of the Other, it is the

becomingness with Heaven. This oneness with the Transcendent is the fulfillment of our responsibility, the culmination of our spiritual struggles to reach the Divine through our endeavor to “Let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream.”¹¹