

"The Spirit of Jewish Prayer"
Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1958)

Our services are conducted with pomp and precision. The rendition of the liturgy is smooth. Everything is present: decorum, voice, ceremony. But one thing is missing: *Life*. One knows in advance what will ensue. There will be no surprise, no adventure of the soul; there will be no sudden burst of devotion. Nothing is going to happen to the soul. Nothing unpredictable must happen to the person who prays. He will attain no insight into the words he reads; he will attain no new perspective for the life he lives.

Has the synagogue become the graveyard where prayer is buried? Are we, the spiritual leaders of American Jewry, members of a *הַבְּרֵה קְדִישָׁא*? There are many who labor in the vineyard of oratory; but who knows how to pray, or how to inspire others to pray? There are many who can execute and display magnificent fireworks; but who knows how to kindle a spark in the darkness of a soul?

The modern synagogue suffers from a *severe cold*. Our congregants preserve a respectful distance between the *הַקָּדוֹשׁ* and themselves. They say the words, "Forgive us for we have sinned," but of course, they are not meant. They say, "Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart..." in lofty detachment, in complete anonymity as if giving an impartial opinion about an irrelevant question.

An air of tranquility, complacency prevails in our synagogues. What can come out of such an atmosphere? The services are prim, the voice is dry, the synagogue is clean and tidy, and the soul of prayer lies in agony. You know no one will scream, no one will cry, the words will be still-born.

The problem is not how to fill the buildings but how to inspire the hearts. And this is a problem to which techniques of child psychology can hardly be applied. The problem is not one of *synagogue attendance* but one of *spiritual attendance*. The problem is not *how to attract bodies to enter the space of a temple* but *how to inspire souls to enter an hour of spiritual concentration* in the presence of God. The problem is time, not space.

Prayer is the microcosm of the soul. It is the whole soul in one moment; the quintessence of all our acts; the climax of all our thoughts. It rises as high as our thoughts. Now, if Torah is nothing but national literature of Jewish people; if the mystery of revelation is discarded as superstition, then prayer is hardly more than a soliloquy. If God does not have power to speak to us, how should we possess the power to speak to Him? Thus, prayer is a part of a greater issue. It depends upon

the total spiritual situation of man and upon a mind within which God is at home. Of course, if our lives are too barren to bring forth the spirit of worship; if all our thoughts and anxieties do not contain enough spiritual substance to be distilled into prayer, an inner transformation is a matter of emergency. And such an emergency we face today. *The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God.* One cannot pray unless he has faith in his own ability to accost the infinite, merciful, eternal God

The way to prayer leads through *acts of wonder* and *radical amazement*. The illusion of total intelligibility, the indifference to the mystery that is everywhere, the foolishness of ultimate self-reliance are serious obstacles on the way. It is in moments of our being faced with the mystery of living and dying, of knowing and not-knowing, of love and the inability to love — that we pray, that *we address ourselves to Him who is beyond the mystery.*

What is a מִצְוָה? *A prayer in the form of a deed.*

The dignity of man consists not in his ability to make tools, machines, guns, but primarily in his being endowed with the gift of addressing God. It is this gift which should be a part of the definition of man,^[47]

In the light of such a decision about the preeminence of prayer, the role as well as the nature of the sermon will have to be reexamined. The prominence given to the sermon as if the sermon were the core and prayer the shell, is not only a drain on the intellectual resources of the rabbis but also a serious deviation from the spirit of our tradition. The sermon unlike prayer has never been considered as one of the supreme things in this world, דְּבָרִים הָעוֹמְדִים בְּרוּמוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם.^[48] If the vast amount of time and energy invested in the search of ideas and devices for preaching; if the fire spent on the altar of oratory were dedicated to the realm of prayer, we would not find it too difficult to convey to others what it means to utter a word in the presence of God.

Preach in order to pray. Preach in order to inspire others to pray. The test of a true sermon is that it can be converted to prayer.