

Text from the Tradition: The Sabbath by Abraham Joshua Heschel

The Sabbath and Presence (text drawn from pp. 16, 31-2, 53, 59-60, 75-6, 100-1)

What is so luminous about a day? What is so precious to captivate the hearts? It is because the seventh day is a mine where spirit's precious metal can be found with which to construct the palace in time, a dimension in which the human is at home with the divine; a dimension in which [humans] aspire to approach the likeness of the divine...All that is divine in the world is brought into union with God...The Sabbath is not only a legal institution, a state of mind or a form of conduct, but a process in the world of spirit. At the beginning of time there was a longing, the longing of the Sabbath for [humans]...The day was a living presence, and when it arrived the people felt as if a gift had come to see them.

When we celebrate the Sabbath we adore precisely something we do not see...The rabbis did not believe that the seventh day was endowed with human features, with a figure or a face...to most of us a person, a human being, seems to be a maximum of being, the ceiling of reality; we think that to personify is to glorify. Yet do not some of us realize at times that a person is no superlative, that to personify the spiritually real is to belittle it? A personification may be both a distortion and a depreciation. The idea of the Sabbath as a Queen or a Bride is not a personification of the Sabbath but an exemplification of a divine attribute, an illustration of God's need for human love; it does not represent a substance but the presence of God, [in relationship to humans]...The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of [humans]. It is possible for the soul to respond in affection, to enter into fellowship with the consecrated day.

What is the Sabbath? *Spirit in the form of time*. With our bodies we belong to space; our spirit, our souls, soar to eternity, aspire to be holy...Spirit in the form of time, eternity, is, indeed, an absurdity to all those who think that the spirit is but an idea in the mind of [humans] or that God is a thing among other things. Yet those who realize that God is at least as great as the known universe, that the spirit is an endless process of which we humbly partake, will understand and experience what it means that the spirit is disclosed at certain moments of time. One must be overawed by the marvel of time to be ready to perceive the presence of eternity in a single moment. One must live and act as if the fate of all time would depend on a single moment.

Time is the dimension wherein [humans] meet God, where in [we] become aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations. Time is the presence of God in the world of space, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all beings. The act of bringing the world into existence is a continuous process. God called the world into being, and that call goes on. There is this present moment because God is present. Every instant is an act of creation. A moment is not a terminal but a flash, a signal of Beginning. Time is perpetual innovation, a synonym for continuous creation. Time is God's gift to the world of space. To witness the perpetual marvel of the world's coming into being is to sense the presence of the Giver in the given, to realize that the source of time is eternity, that the secret of being is the eternal within time. Creation is the language of God, Time is [God's] song, and the things of space the consonants in the song. To sanctify time is to sing the vowels in unison with God.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Heschel's teachings on the Sabbath provide a wonderful integration of the *tastiness* of yummy ideas, the work of the intellect, assessing philosophical and metaphysical categories such as time and being, and the *warmness* of tender embrace, the work of the heart, recognizing affective and relational categories such as the givenness-of-the-gifts-of-the-Giver and presence. Such integration is hard, artful craft, and it requires both precision and constant attention. It is too easy to prefer one or the other, the head or the heart, and we often slip into bias for one or the other unconsciously.

At the core of Heschel's Jewish sense of Reality is the assurance of Presence. Yes, time and eternity are vast and constantly unraveling into Being, which can feel overwhelming to grasp, and yet, we human beings are situated in time through a relational container marked by love, tenderness, and promise. Heschel helpfully distinguishes between the dangers of the personification of that Presence and the promise of our particularity. We may not be able to see the face of God when we cry out; we may not be able to knock on an actual heavenly door when we need something; we may not be able to drop off a ballot when we wish to have our say about the specifics of how eternity are turning out; we may not be able to see the Holy One, but we can be seen. We can perceive the warmth of encounter against the vast emptiness of time. We can sense that tonight's sunset was a perfect ending to a tiring day; we can feel addressed by the bird chirping a particular song in our deep moment of anxiety; we can offer gratitude for the friend who offers a shoulder to lean on. Our heads, hearts, and wills can perceive Presence in particular ways, even against the backdrop of eternity, even without the aide of a personified messenger delivering a text from the heavens.

In our prayer and meditation, it is the constancy of this Presence, always, already present, within which we drop both our loud, chaotic outcries of pain and our quiet, still offerings of silence. In our prayer and meditation, it is our attention and our receptivity that allow us to perceive the power of eternity in a moment. In our prayer and meditation, we offer a period of Sabbath to mark the sanctity of the entire day.

Questions for Reflection:

- What do you notice in general from the text/teaching today, in your head, heart and senses?
- What does Sabbath look or feel like in your daily life?
- What does Sabbath look or feel like in your prayer and practice?