

DARSHANUT

Darshanut, *derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.*

We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.

IN THE PRESENCE

THEODORE STEINBERG

There are many difficult verses in the Bible, and even when the meanings of all the words are known the intent of the verse may not be clear. This can present an especially challenging and interesting problem, as in the opening phrase of Deuteronomy 29:9-10, when Moses speaks to Israel:

'You are standing this day all of you before the Lord your God; your tribal leaders, your tribes, your elders, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the stranger that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood unto the drawer of your water.'

What might it mean to stand before God?

The magazine *The New Yorker* once had a cartoon showing a man driving past a roadside billboard reading "Prepare to Meet Thy God." In the next frame, he is looking in a mirror and combing his hair. Is the point of this cartoon-parable that preparing to meet the Divine presence should call for more than grooming? The phrases "Standing before God" in the Torah and "Prepare to meet thy God" on the billboard both suggest the same metaphor about a way of experiencing the events of our lives. It is about having a sense of God's presence, of being under His providence and judgment.

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The psychoanalyst Theodore Reik spoke of listening to a patient with a "third ear." He meant that a therapist must listen for the hidden meanings of words and phrases that are obscure clues to the nature of the disorder, but not detected by ordinary listening. This perhaps describes how a person might attempt to sense God's presence, with more than ordinary seeing and hearing.

In the book *Jewish Meditation*,¹ the author says of prayer:

While reciting a word, and for a brief time afterwards, do not think of anything other than the simple meaning of the word. Allow the words to penetrate your inner being, opening yourself to feel and see the meaning of each word

This is not easy to do. If I were to meditate on single words or whole paragraphs, I would still be reciting the preliminary psalms when the congregation reached *Alenu* and the end of the service. But I suppose that is what deep, meditative prayer is about; at the very least, it is not clock-prayer, bound by schedules and other prayerless concerns.

There are parallels to this kind of meditative seeing and hearing in literature and theater. In "*The Fantasticks*," the longest-running off-Broadway play, there are lines that could almost be about experiencing prayer, when one character tries to explain to another how to see and experience something:

[T]ry to see it; Not with your eyes, for they are wise; But see it with your ears: The cool green breathing of the leaves. And hear it with the inside of your hand: The soundless sound of shadows flicking light. Celebrate sensation.

There is another literary example in Joyce Cary's novel *The Horse's Mouth*, when an artist tries to teach his girlfriend how to look at a painting:

"Don't just look at it. Feel it with your eye. . . . At first you feel the shapes in the flat . . . and then you feel it in the round You feel . . . the sharp edges, the flats . . . the cools and the warms Imagination opens it for you. I'm trying to teach you a big happiness. "

Are these ways of seeing and hearing part of meditative prayer? Of catching a sense of the Divine? In Judaism, we have various ways of trying to sense God's presence; performing *mitzvot*, studying holy books, and of course, prayer. The classical *b'rakah* [blessing] is a case in point. Whether said over wine or bread or any sort of experience, it is our verbalized attempt to be-

come aware of and to acknowledge the Divine Presence in a moment of our lives. We are attempting an awesome task; to think about experiencing God, as if it were possible or simple. But it surely is not simple, and perhaps it is not even possible.

Deuteronomy 31:17-18 says that if Israel sins, God will hide His face: '*Anochi haster astir panai* [literally: 'I will hide, hide, Myself . . .']'. One teacher suggests that doubling of the word "hide" may mean that God even hides the fact that He is hiding. In such a time of hiddenness, some may dismiss the reality of the Divine as a sweet fiction, while others may focus all energies on reviving the Divine-human relationship. The classical tradition understood *hester panim* [Divine hiddenness] as meaning that God turns away from us when we sin. But when Israel repents, the relationship is reestablished.

In our own time, many have rejected this latter view as too simplistic, especially in relation to the Holocaust. We are left with a few alternatives: One is total disbelief; all the talk about experiencing God's presence and faith is a hoax. Another is a defiant, *Af al pi ken* [in spite of everything] I will believe in God's reachable realness. A third possibility is that God imposes a self-limitation upon Himself for the sake of human freedom. God hides Himself as long as the world freely chooses to be alienated from Him. Once, a child wept because in a game of hide-and-seek he hid but the other children did not look for him. His grandfather told him, "That's why God weeps, too. People aren't looking for Him."

We have looked a little into a deep and complex religious question and not answered it. For those who are moved to continue the search, may they be tempted to seek the Lord where He may be found: In the ways our ancestors taught: In prayer, *mitzvot* and good deeds and the holy books; but also in the ordinary events of our daily lives, especially as we try to comprehend the deeper meaning of our own experience, and what our senses try to teach.

NOTES

1. Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).