

Nitzavim: What Does Your Heart Say?

The concluding chapter of Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* is entitled, "The Heart is the Last Frontier." In it, Wilkerson tells the story of a plumber who comes to her house after she found water in her basement. The plumber is a white man, Wilkerson is a Black woman. At first, the plumber is visibly reluctant to engage her, or even to recognize the fact that she indeed owns her house. He is not helpful, forcing Wilkerson to move boxes around on her own. He is dismissive, not listening to her suggestions about where the problem might be coming from. Finally, the plumber says he can't fix the problem and that Wilkerson should simply buy a new sump pump. His heart, it seems, is hard. Wilkerson describes herself as "steaming."

"Since he wasn't helping," she writes, "I felt I had nothing to lose. Something came over me, and I threw a Hail Mary at his humanity." Wilkerson mentions that her mother had died the week before and asks, "Is your mother still alive?" This breaks the ice and, it seems, pierces the armor of his heart. The plumber and Wilkerson connect over their shared grief. They begin to tell stories to one another about loved ones they've lost. The plumber becomes engaged and energetic and solves the problem quickly (it was the water heater). He even winds up coming back after he leaves, realizing he should turn off the water heater, which was empty.

"How different things had been just minutes before," writes Wilkerson. "My mother must've been talking to your mother,' I said, 'and telling her to get her boy to help her girl down there. 'My daughter needs your son's help.'"¹²⁵

The story is a poignant conclusion to Wilkerson's historical reflection on systems of caste in India, Nazi Germany, and the United States. With it, Wilkerson reminds us that such systems rely upon and reinforce the idea that we do not share a common humanity, that some people are less human, less images of the Divine, less worthy of love and respect than others. Through the title of the chapter, Wilkerson reminds us that systems of separation and oppression are fundamentally built, maintained, overcome, and dismantled through the work of the heart – the part of us that is ultimately unknowable by others and only available to us and to the Divine whose spark lives within it.

Our words – in day-to-day interactions with plumbers and in legal documents like the Nuremberg Laws – convey our hearts: their encasement in a shell of fear, their openness to connection and trust. With this closing story, Wilkerson challenges us: Can we practice a language, in both our interper-

¹²⁵ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House, 2020, 374-375.

sonal relations and in our laws and policies, that is grounded in and helps to amplify our capacity for loving, compassionate hearts?

Putting Our Hearts Into Our Words

This brings us to a beautiful teaching of the Maggid of Mezritch on a mysterious verse from Parashat Nitzavim: “Hidden things belong to YHVH our God; but with revealed things, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching” (Deut. 29:28). Classical commentators generally understood this to refer to God’s capacity to punish those who secretly – in their hearts – worship false gods. Here, for instance, is Rashi: “I do not threaten to punish you because of secret thoughts, for these belong to YHVH our God, who will exact punishment from that individual; but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children that we may put away the evil from our midst; and if we do not execute judgment upon them, the whole community will be punished.” In this reading, the verse is a reminder that, no matter what we may say or do externally, God knows what is in our hearts, so we should be careful what we allow to take root in them.

The Maggid offers us a very different reading. (The selection below has been edited slightly for ease of reading.)

תורת המגיד נצבים

ובוודאי אם אדם מתפלל או לומד תורה בדחילו ורחימו... וכל כוונתו לשם שמים להעלותם אל שורשם אל הקדושה העליונה, בוודאי הדיבורים שלו מתחברים לעילא. ומה גם כי ידוע שבכל דיבור ודיבור, ובכל אות ואות, נכללין כל ס' רבוא אתון דאורייתא, שהם נגד ס' רבוא נשמותיהן של ישראל, וכוונתו רצויה לעילא לעשות יחודים וזיווגים, ובשם כל ישראל שהם שורש הששים רבוא... ונמצא האדם הלומד וכוונתו אל הנזכר, אף שאינו לומד כל התורה כאחת, אף על פי כן יכול הוא לעורר ולקשר כל העולמות. וממנו יכול לברוא עולמות כמבואר בזוהר כי כל ס' רבוא אותיות נכללין זה מזה, אם כן במה שהוא לומד אם מעט אם רב נכללה כל התורה וכל נשמות בני ישראל....

ונחזור לענין "הנסתרות לה אלהינו וגו'". פירושו: "הנסתרות" הם יראה ואהבה, שהם חכמה ובינה, שהם אותיות י"ה מהשם הנזכר. אם האדם לומד ומתפלל בדחילו ורחימו, שהם הנסתרות, הוא עושה דבר גדול עד מאוד, שהוא מחבר ומקשר דיבוריו שהם חלק אל"ה ממעל, שבכל דיבור מלובש שם הוי"ה שהוא שורש כל הדברים והמהוה כל הוי"ת, יכול הוא לקשר וליחד כל העולמות העליונים כנוכר. משא"כ "הנגלות" שהם רק קול ודיבור, שהוא נגלה לכל כשהוא מדבר ומשמיע קולו. אבל האהבה והיראה הם בלב

האדם, הם נקראים נסתרות שאינם נגלים לבני אדם....

Torat HaMaggid Nitzavim

Certainly, when we pray or study Torah with purpose and intensity... and all our intention is directed to Heaven, that we may lift up our prayers and our study to their primordial source, then without a doubt our words become connected above. Moreover, we know this is so since every word and every letter contains the 600,000 letters of the Torah, which correspond to the 600,000 souls of the people Israel. Therefore, when our intentions are welcomed in the supernal realms, and our devotions are performed on behalf of all Israel, who are the root of the 600,000 letters, we can perform these unifications and pairings. ... Thus, when we study with our intention directed in this manner, even if we do not study the whole Torah as one totality, nevertheless we can awaken and connect all of the worlds. And from there we can also create worlds, as explained in the Zohar. For all 600,000 letters contain one another. Thus, however much we study, a small or large amount, our study will encompass the entire Torah and all the souls of Israel ...

Now we can return to our verse: “Hidden things belong to YHVH our God; but with revealed things, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching.” The hidden things refer to awe and love, which correspond to the sefirot *chochma* and *bina*, which likewise correspond to the letters *yod-heh* of the Divine Name YHVH. When we study and pray with purpose and intensity – which are, themselves, these hidden dimensions – we do something very great: We connect and bind our words, which are a manifestation of the recognizable, this-worldly aspect of the Divine (corresponding to the name *Elohim*), [to the higher, more concealed aspects of the Divine, which correspond to YHVH]. For in every word is garbed the name YHVH, the source of all things and the ultimate ground of all reality. Thus, we are able to connect and unify all the upper worlds. This is not the case with that which is “revealed,” which is the nature of voice and speech. These are manifest to everyone when we speak and make our voices heard. But love and awe dwell in our hearts – thus they are called hidden, for they are not discernable to others.

There are two parts to the Maggid's teaching. In the first paragraph, he offers us a beautiful image: No matter how much or how little we study or pray, if we do it with genuine purpose and intensity – if our hearts are truly in it – then we may experience an expansive and profound sense of unification between body, mind, and spirit, and between ourselves and all of creation through space and time. Even a single letter of the Torah, a single word of Jewish prayer, when uttered with genuine focus and attention, contains everything: the entirety of Torah, the entirety of the Jewish people. It may happen that we may be distracted by feelings of inadequacy, self-judgment, pride, or fear that may arise in us when we are praying or studying. But, says the Maggid, if we can manage to not be governed by those feelings, and instead attune our hearts to the invitation from the Divine that beckons to us from within them – then that's everything. One word recited with genuine attention and intention, with genuine focus and purpose, with an awakened and directed heart, has the power of all the words of Torah and all the souls of the Jewish people combined.

In the second paragraph, the Maggid connects this spiritual insight to the verse from our parasha. In doing so, he offers a dramatic contrast to the classical depiction of God as omniscient watcher over our inner lives. Yes, our hearts are our most intimate zones, ultimately unknowable by others. Yes, we are capable of being less than genuine with our words – saying one thing externally while telling ourselves something very different. The classical commentators understand the verse to focus on Divine punishment for improper belief. But the Maggid invites us instead to consider, in a positive way, the power of aligning our words with our hearts – our external expressions with our internal meanings. It isn't only that we tap into that network of 600,000 letters and souls that he described earlier. His point is that, when we pray and study with genuinely directed hearts, we unify the upper and lower worlds, the inner and outer; we bring together YHVH and *Elohim*, forming a conduit for the Divine flow through the cosmos and through ourselves. If we can really put our hearts into our words – if we can direct our words so they really express our hearts – that is nothing short of an act of cosmic significance.

Expressing the Stirrings of Our Hearts

I'm not a Hasidic master, and I cannot claim to have achieved the quality of experience the Maggid describes. Yet I draw inspiration from it, particularly concerning my own practice of prayer. To me, as for the Maggid, *tefillah* is not only an opportunity for expression; it is also a duty prescribed by *halakha*. I live my life with a felt sense of obligation to recite the prayers of the traditional liturgy at their prescribed times. Yet by experiencing *tefillah* as an obligation

in this way, I run into the challenge that when I recite the prayers at the right time, my intention may well be more focused on discharging my sense of duty than on attuning my heart to the Divine voice within. This is not an uncommon problem – not only for people who share my *halakbic* orientation, but also for people who have been educated and acculturated to perform prayers by rote. In both cases, it's often hard to say our hearts are in it.

So how might the Maggid's teaching help us? In my own practice, I find that the most essential thing is simply slowing down and exercising a dose of self-compassion. As David Mastie, a favorite high school science teacher, used to tell us: "Do less, better." In this context, Mr. Mastie's dictum might mean, first, to give myself permission that I don't need to recite every word in the siddur or read every line of the Torah or the Talmud or the rest of the awe-inspiring – and potentially overwhelming – library of Jewish texts. As the Maggid says, even one word recited with genuine intention and purpose contains within it the entire Torah and the entire Jewish people. So I begin by reminding myself of that (or, in the words of Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulchan Arukh*, the authoritative code of *halakha*: "Better few supplications with intention than many without intention").¹²⁶

I find that mindfulness meditation can be a very useful aid, helping me cultivate a space in my mind-heart that is quiet, where I can be attentive to what is stirring within. For me, 10 to 20 minutes of meditation is often a good amount of time to prepare myself for prayer. But even when I choose, for whatever reason, not to give myself that much time, even just a few minutes of focused, quiet attention can make a world of difference.

Once I sense that I've reached a more settled, calmer mind, I begin to recite a part of the liturgy or a passage of Torah or other sacred text. In the case of prayer, the part I choose to recite is determined by the prayers traditionally prescribed for the particular time of day and what the *halakha* has to say about which of those are most central; in the case of study, the text might be suggested by the weekly Torah reading cycle, but might also come to me another way, through a commitment to study as regular practice.

In some cases – particularly in prayer – these are familiar words with which I have a long and intimate relationship. Yet whether or not they are familiar, these texts are sacred: they are letters and words that have created and continue to create worlds. (It is here that I differ from Mary Oliver, who suggests "it could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones" to which we pay attention.¹²⁷ While attention is necessary, in the case of Jewish spiritual practice it is insufficient.) Thus, as I return my attention to my breath as an

¹²⁶ *Orakh Hayim* 1:4

¹²⁷ Oliver, "Praying"

anchor, ultimately, I seek to bring my heart-mind to the words I'm reciting, and to the Divine presence that these words can aid me in perceiving. I try keep my heart open to sense the meaning the prayer stirs within me. As I articulate a word or words, I try to attune my heart-mind to that meaning, and thereby experience the alignment of inner and outer, upper and lower, YHVH and *Elohim*, that the Maggid describes. The meaning is not fixed; it is unique to that prayer or study encounter, even if the shape of it is similar. That, I think, is as it should be, providing both a stable structure of discipline, practice, and language, and, not in spite of, but *through* that structure, facilitating freshness and renewal.

Renewing Old Structures and Unblocking the Divine Flow

There is, then, a lesson here about structure – and that brings us back to Wilkerson and her examination of caste. A caste system is a structure of language and practice that aims to keep people separated, and particularly to keep people in their place. It tries to fly in the face of our innate awareness that we are, in fact, interconnected, equally imbued with the spark of the Divine simply by virtue of being human, capable of renewal and change. As Wilkerson shows, caste systems go to extraordinary lengths to try and change the way we think, perceive the world, comport our bodies, and experience the Divine. And it often does so through a reading of sacred texts that does not serve our inner life but, instead, seeks to stultify and oppress it.

It is not an accident that the final chapter of Wilkerson's book is called "The Heart is the Final Frontier," and I don't think it's an accident that Wilkerson's interlocutor in that chapter is a plumber. The interaction she has with him, at first, is characterized by blockage and resistance. Something is stopped up. Language doesn't flow between them, and their relationship falls into the traps of disconnection, fear, anger, and resentment – not unlike the relationship too many Jews have developed with the words of the siddur or the Torah.

But then the relationship gets unclogged when Wilkerson's words open up the plumber's heart. He had a desire for loving connection in there all along, but it was blocked. In Wilkerson's question, "Is your mother still alive?" the plumber experiences a genuine expression of care which opens a connection, leads to more language and more connection, and ultimately yields a small, yet perhaps still cosmically significant, act of redemption.

As in the time of the Maggid, for so many people today the words of Jewish prayer and study can feel like dead letters or stale language. Too many people, tragically, experience Jewish prayers and texts as, at best, something to put up with and, at worst, something stultifying and even oppressive. They – we – don't experience our encounter with the siddur and the Torah as opening

up channels through which the Divine presence flows. Our purpose in this series of essays has been to try and change that: to help us experience these texts as aids in cultivating a deeper inner life that helps us open up to a far richer relationship with ourselves, the Divine, the cosmos. And to that I will add, in the spirit of both Wilkerson and the Maggid: Redemption will come only when our hearts are opened. So let's keep opening them up.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

- Consider the Maggid's teaching that, "every word and every letter contains the 600,000 letters of the Torah, which correspond to the 600,000 souls of the people Israel." Try to explain this idea in your own words. What does the Maggid mean? Once you've paraphrased it, consider how it makes you feel: Is this image pleasant, unpleasant, inspiring, overwhelming, or something else?
- Have you prayed or studied Torah with the kind of intensity and direction the Maggid describes? If yes, how do you describe the experience? What happened within you? What about you, in that moment, if anything, enabled the experience to occur? What, if anything, about the words helped effectuate the experience? If not, what do you imagine such an experience might be like?
- How do you feel about your own relationship with Jewish liturgy? Do you find prayers to be a help, a hindrance, both, or something else? Does Jewish liturgy make you feel inviting into something larger? Does it seem to erect a barrier to expressing yourself? How, if at all, have you tried to enable Jewish prayer to be a meaningful form of heart expression?

Ideas for Practice

Rabbi David Jaffe is the founder of the Kirva Institute and leads the Inside Out Wisdom and Action Project. He is the author of *Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Approach to Personal and Social Change*, which won the National Jewish Book Award for Contemporary Jewish life. In this episode of IJS's Open My Heart podcast, David shares a practice called "Turning Torah into Tefillah," which combines mindfulness meditation, an encounter with a passage of Jewish teaching, and prayer in a way that facilitates the kind of structured and renewed engagement we've discussed in this essay. Consider trying this practice this week. You can access both the audio of David's teaching and a transcript of the episode here: <https://www.jewishspirituality.org/turn-your-torah-into-tefillah/>.