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The Power of You

Martin Buber said, when we speak of God as You, I understand what we mean, but as soon as we talk about God as He, She, or It, I don't understand and I don't believe. I feel the same way. I think that it's not the second-person language that gets us in trouble, it's the third person. This desire that humans have to understand the universe is beautiful, but then we impute all kinds of characteristics and actions to this primal need and create a God-concept—a third-person idea instead of a second-person experience. God likes us but not those other people; God is a He but He's not a She. These are third-person terms, and anytime there's a move from first or second person to third person, there's a move from an immediate experience, something that's right now happening in your present awareness and understanding, to a concept and an elaboration, and that's asking for trouble.

JAY MICHAELSON

For me, praying without saying "You" to God is like getting a greeting card instead of a love letter. While third-person language might express truth with beautiful words, the language of "I and You" gives voice to the direct experience of my heart in a relationship—my desire, my pain, my hopes.

But for those of us who don't believe in God as a person who makes personal decisions about people and events, praying to God directly seems disingenuous, if not dishonest. We understand why mystics meditate: to strip the illusion of separation and become one with God. But praying to a Person outside of themselves? Isn't that the dualism they decry?

If we're fully enlightened and everything is perfect and everything is God, then yes, we should do away with second-person prayer language because we don't need it. But most of the time we need it. As soon as we say "You," there is a sense of immediacy. There is a real beauty to striving to say "You" to as much of life as possible.

JAY MICHAELSON

Indeed, as we have already seen, our mystic and neo-mystic teachers find that personal prayer adds a critical layer to meditative practices: love and devotion.

I have a relationship with God as lover, with something that is real outside of me, but at the same time, it is real and I am a part of it. So when I pray, I choose the position of viewing it as outside of myself because that adds something to my experience. When I meditate, I choose the experience of knowing that I am part of this oneness, and that if I'm completely present, I can let go of the boundaries between self and other. You ask, why not pray by making affirmations without addressing God? I wouldn't tell someone who enjoys affirmations, "Don't do affirmations; go talk to God instead," but there is an emotional connection achieved through the poetry of me and you that touches me very deeply. It is opening my heart to the other that has the potential for dramatic change.

RABBI LAVEY YITZCHAK DERBY

The heart language of “I and You” allows us to express our yearning for connection with the Divine. There is a special quality to the dialogue when the other is God. I am devoted to my wife and family, but I serve them differently than I serve the transcendent. Expressing devotion to God allows us to articulate and internalize our highest desires.

My Buddhism and Judaism complement one another. In the dharma, we want to see clearly and accept what is. We may not like it, and we may work to change it, but seeing things as they are is the first step toward liberation. “It is what it is.” Judaism adds a devotional ingredient. The “Is” turns to You, to I—“I am what I am” [Exodus 3:14]. We personalize our interaction with the infinite.

JAY MICHAELSON

Saying You comes from the heart and lets our yearning soar. Prayer would be diminished without it.

Still, prayer must be truthful to be effective. If God is All Being or an impersonal force and my speech to God is not reciprocated, is my prayer honest? If God as person is a projection on my part, am I addressing my own projection? This question is both pivotal and troubling for me.

As a leading proponent of Process Theology, which views God as manifesting in the evolutionary processes of the universe, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson must deal with the same issue.

I live in a very personal way with a lot of impersonal things. When I go to the Pacific Ocean, I talk to her all the time. I don't expect the Pacific Ocean to be conscious of my conversation and I don't think the Pacific Ocean is listening to me, but she's definitely my mother, and I go into her as one of her sons. That has to do with me and my personality with her. I do that with mountains and trees, and I talk to all sorts of inanimate objects constantly because that's the only way I

know how to relate to everything. So on the one hand, I don't spend time worrying about whether God has personality or not, because I talk to everything, and the amazing thing is that if you talk to everything as though they have personalities, eventually you notice the personalities that they have.

RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON

Since I gave a great deal of care to my treatment of this question in *A Wild Faith: Jewish Ways into Wilderness, Wilderness Ways into Judaism* (Jewish Lights), I'd like to share it with you here.

Which metaphors shall I use for God, this more-than-a-person (indeed, more-than-anything-I-know) reality, which I perceive as a force possessing intelligence and will? ...

The Kabbalist's metaphor for the *shefa*, the River of Light, best models my experience of God. A river is always rushing toward me. Divinity is always coming my way. And how I stand in it influences the flow. So my experience of the river has a lot to do with my own willpower, decisions, and actions. I can swim upstream or float along.

What I can't control is the flow and course of the river. Sometimes the waters are still and I'm so busy watching television or cooking a meal, I can forget that I'm in it at all. At other times I go over a waterfall and I can't help but be aware of the river.

But the key point is that I experience a river personally. When I paddle this way or that, the river pushes me in response. It may send me along my course or divert me to a new direction I did not intend. But the river's response to my action is unique to me. It pushes me in this direction at this time, and no one else.

So, too, do I understand my relation to the River of Light. Because of my inability to live in receptive mode, often I am hardly aware of it. But when I enter I-Thou, the river "speaks" to me loud and clear. I have no idea what it will say.

Sometimes it may demand justice, sometimes I feel overwhelming love. Sometimes I am humbled and contrite, other times empowered and energized. The encounter with God is spontaneous and open-ended. Most important, it is always profound and meaningful in a personal way. God has “spoken” to me about my life in this moment in this place. I live in personal relationship with impersonal God.

The Kabbalists capture this when they say that the ten aspects or spheres of Divinity comprise what scholars call the “godhead,” the totality of God’s knowable self in the cosmos. It is as impersonal a name for God as it gets. Each sphere represents different aspects of the Divine—mercy, judgment, beauty, love, strength, etc. Depending on what people think, say, and do, people interact with the sphere that their behavior has merited. From the impersonal godhead they have received a personalized rejoinder.

Prayer makes us conscious of the fact that we are always standing in the *shefa*. It moves me along the spiritual path, toward receptive mode. And when I say You to the sacred One—standing with senses open, fully aware of this precious world—I am likely to feel the press of holiness against me, a window of I-Thou in an I-It world. I receive a response to my thoughts, words, feelings, and fears in this moment of my life. God has answered my prayer.