

# Of Cathedrals and Shtiebelach: Two Concepts of Prayer

- Basil Herring

Parshat Bemidbar 5760

June 2, 2000

1. This morning I wish to change the pace and the focus of my comments, away from what I have spoken in recent weeks, not to speak as I have been doing, of Israel or of America, not of exile and redemption, and not of history or of politics and sociology. But rather to address the inner world of the spirituality that should be at the center of our lives and our synagogue, our homes and our families, our community and our people.

2. Let me begin with reference to a trip I took about a year ago. Last summer, when Sherri and I visited Italy, as many in our community have similarly done, we could not help but be impressed, if not overwhelmed, by the massive size and imposing presence of the cathedrals that stood at the center of each major city, be it Rome, Florence, Venice, or Milan. And that was just when viewed from the outside, given the fact that a Jew is not permitted by halachah to enter a cathedral. We could just imagine how powerful the impact of these edifices upon those who enter their portals to pray. And I for one could not avoid making a comparison to even the largest synagogues I know, a comparison which of course leaves the synagogue very much in physical and esthetic eclipse.

3. Now of course it is possible that some Jews are embarrassed by the comparison, and feel badly that theirs is bigger, and more impressive, than ours. But not I. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain put it at the convention of the RCA that I attended this week, the purpose and ethos of a cathedral is convey the greatness and power of God, compared with the smallness and fragility of man, who should feel overwhelmed in the awesome presence of God. Whereas the purpose of a synagogue is not have a Jew who enters its portals feel closer to God, and higher than the angels. For this same reason, for Christianity, a man or a woman need an intermediary to be able to relate to, communicate with, or placate, such an awesome and infinitely powerful deity.

4. But this is not so for the Jew, for whom an intimate closeness to God, direct and unintermediated, is not only possible but mandatory. And for whom prayer and forgiveness must take place up close and without an intervening third party, be he priest or confessor, or some man deemed divine. Hence a Jew who enters a synagogue does not, and should not, feel overwhelmed or crushed, overpowered or diminished. To the contrary he or she should experience a spirituality that empowers him, and raises her, to sense the closeness of God, whose presence, or shechina, is in our midst. As the Hallel psalm puts it, *ram al goyim Hashem al ha-shamayim kevodo, mi ka-Hashem Elokeinu hamagbihi la-shavet, hamashpili lirot ba-shamayim u-vaaretz*, i.e., the conception of God among the nations may be that of one who is high, far and above the heavens but who is there like the God we believe in, Who while He is indeed exalted in His glory, nonetheless brings Himself down in providential fashion to see and hear all that transpires both in the heavens above and on the earth below!

5. How else explain the Torah's phrase, when commanding the mishkan, *ve'asu li mikdash veshachanti betocham*, "let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst," which Chazal emphatically punctuate "in their midst", rather than "in it." How else comprehend the aphorism attributed to the Kotzker rebbe who asked his chasidim "where does God dwell," and then answered his incredulous followers by saying "He dwells wherever we let Him in," by which of course he meant "into our hearts and our lives, not into a big building or physical location." We are not insignificant cyphers in a vast impersonal cosmos: we are surely not God, but God is with us, indeed in us, if only we let Him in!

6. Allow me to point out what you may already know. There was a time in the religious life of American Jews when it was the "in-thing" to practice a religiosity that was more concerned with form than with substance, with decorum rather than with spontaneity, with large sanctuaries rather than intimate so-called *shtibelach*, with ceremonial grandeur rather than internalized prayerful piety, with cantorial virtuosity and rabbinic oratory rather than communal singing and *divrei Torah*. Well here is the secret, and the new reality, like it or not: That time has passed. Today, in many segments of the community, but especially among the young, there is an undeniable and admirable yearning for, and joining of, synagogues and shuls that practice, teach, and foster deeper personal spirituality, more communal participation, greater congregational singing in place of cantorial virtuosity, and rabbinic presentations that teach rather than preach. In Jewish life, in this new century, the synagogue as pseudo-cathedral is dead. And a new model has arisen in its stead: a model that emphasizes not prayer but davenning, not pulpit pronouncements but love of learning, not superstars in performance, but men and women joining together to talk to God in heartfelt expression of *tefilla*, supplemented by hearing the words of God through attentive listening to the reading of the Torah, which is God's word to us.

7. And that change, frankly, is a wonderful thing. For it is how things should be. It is a change that we should embrace enthusiastically, not run from it in fear. And I find one reason for such welcome, in a verse in this morning's parshah, *Bemidbar 2:2*, properly understood. *Ish al diglo, ve'otot leveit avotam, yachanu Bnei Yisrael, mi-neged, saviv le'ohel mo'ed yachanu*. Each person shall encamp according to his flag, following the ensignia of their father's household, so shall the Israelites encamp, surrounding the Tabernacle.

8. Listen if you will to the comments of R. Efrayim Lunshitz, author of the *Kli Yakar*, as they illuminate the point by way of a well known midrash. When the Israelites came to Sinai, and the heavens "opened up" for God to reveal himself, the Israelites witnessed the angels surrounding God as they sang His praises and His glory. At that moment they heard the nations of the world calling to them with the words (paraphrased in *Shir Hashirim*) *shuvi shuvi ha-Shulamit ve'nechezeh bach*. Return unto us O Shulamite, they we may elevate you to a position of grandeur, like dukes and noblemen. To which the Israelites respond "what can you offer us that is greater than the circle of our camp," the circle by which we are encamped around the Shechina or presence of God in the mishkan, with each tribe in its appointed place. For when we are so arranged singing the praises of God, each of us drawn up spiritually to the divine presence in our midst, we achieve our greatest glory, in imitation of the celestial angels above. This then is the glory of the Jew: to draw close to God, placing Him at the center of our beings, as He radiates

holiness and purification to and throughout the people Israel. In so doing to achieve a rarified spirituality, transcending the bounds of material striving, transforming our mundane existence into extraordinary expression.

9. It is for this reason that we have started to place the bimah, from where the Chazan leads davenning and the Torah is read, where by ancient rabbinic tradition it always belonged: i.e., in the middle of the people, surrounded by the tribes, and the families of Israel. Forget about the fact that it is more conducive to synagogue decorum, not in any way like a church or cathedral where the priestly class are set up above and beyond that masses in unctious garments of spiritual elitism and divide. What is crucial is that the placement of the bimah convey unmistakably that our prayer services are not opera or theater or the performing arts. They are the voice of the klal, the corporate entity of Israel, poured forth in unison and in harmony. And that kriyat ha-Torah, the reading of the Torah, is a proclamation in fact that the Torah must stand at the center of our lives, as individuals, as families, and as a community, not just lip service that we perform as it is ceremonially carried around for us to kiss.

10. In a few days we will celebrate Shavuot, zeman matan Torateinu. May it be God's will that we too will be privileged on that occasion to re-experience that epochal moment at Sinai, to be blessed to behold and to imitate the angels on high as they surround the Eternal God, both they and we singing praise to His glorious Shechina, in our midst and at our very center, achieved through exalted prayer and sustained study, to achieve our truest glory, in the eyes of God and man alike.