

## **The Praying Masters of My Soul**

On certain occasions my teacher used to repeat to me the story of the proud parent, who, on returning from witnessing a grand and magnificent military parade, reported to his friends: "There were thousands upon thousands of soldiers, and all of them were out of step, except my son!"

The solitary soldier, of course, is every one of us. For me, the story was then, and still remains, a powerful teaching, with many dimensions of meaning. It is about self-centeredness, and about blindness to others. It is about remembering who one is, and one's place in the world. It is about the unredeemed state of humanity. It is about sleep and awakening. It is even about that most dangerous of spiritual sins, self-pity. And it is about learning to get in step.

According to one Jewish tradition, everything exists in its proper place in the world, everything is in step, except human beings. Every mountain, every pebble, every crystal is as it should be by its very nature, unless it has been dislocated by man: every animal, every bird, every forest and every tree, each moves, each comes into life, grows, decays, and dies, as it should, properly. The sun and moon glide smoothly in their orbits; even the angels fulfill their functions perfectly and unselfconsciously. It is as if the entire cosmos was lying within a great magnetic field, and every created being is like a particle that moves only along its particular line of force. In this ordered cosmos, the human being is unique. Because he alone is out of place, he alone can change his place. He can decide who he is. Among all created beings only he has the power to direct the course, to determine the rhythm, to alter the flow of his life. A human being is actively involved in the evolution of his being. A caterpillar cannot choose if and when it will become a chrysalis and a butterfly; the planets cannot alter their orbits. A human being, on the other hand, can decide whether or not to seek wholeness and redemption; whether or not to align himself with the Divine will. Nevertheless, though all humans are blessed with this faculty of choice, very few manage to use it to good effect. The truth of the matter is, getting in step is a very difficult task.

In my teacher's parable the solitary soldier can get in step with his colleagues very simply. If he looks at them carefully, and then he observes himself, he discovers that something is wrong. They become a kind of mirror for him; but they reflect not what he is doing, or who he appears to be at that moment, but rather that which exists within him in potential, who he can become. When he can look within himself and see the world, in this case, the parade (as opposed to projecting himself onto the world—a sure recipe for distorted vision), he can make the necessary correction to his marching. By skipping twice on the same foot, he can move into harmony with his colleagues.

Teaching stories are so powerful because they isolate a single element and focus all attention on it, making the moral very simple to grasp. But to learn from them we have to translate them into the complex reality of our lives. So for us, getting in step is much more difficult than it is for the soldier in the allegory. First of all, unlike the soldier, we perform not just one function, marching, but many. It is as if we were not one, but ten different soldiers, ten different selves, and when we start to look at them, we discover that they are in disarray, each marching in his own time, and pulling in a different direction. Before we (that is, the whole of us, all ten soldiers) can get in step with the rest of the world, the various parts have to be brought into inner alliance. The mind must work with the heart, not against it; speech must echo thought; the hand must follow the eye; and the divine soul must master the animal soul. Secondly, we march not in one parade, but in many, and we must get in step with all of them. It is like playing many games of chess simultaneously, except that there is a different set of rules on each board. Thus we work in our immediate environments, with our families, our colleagues, our friends, and our jobs. But we are also active in larger settings, within our traditions and our cultures. We live in different cycles of time, each of which has its own structure and content—the hours of the day and the days of the week, the seasons of the year and the seasons of our life, the periods of history and the epochs of the unfolding of the Divine plan; and we exist in all realms of reality, from the highest spheres to inanimate dust. Ultimately, we must learn to integrate all aspects of our being into all levels of terrestrial and celestial realities. In order to do this, we must be able to "see" these

realities, so that they become mirrors of our souls. In the process, we acquire, or develop, new organs of perception, of knowing.

We start our work with schooling and by using our five senses, our "native" observation of what is around us. We study with teachers, and then we probably change schools and teachers. We look at our immediate environment, at the phenomenal world. We examine it carefully, objectively, compassionately. For example, I look at the sparrows on my lawn, and when I know them, I make them my teachers: I note their hopping and their pecking, the effortless economy of their being, the way that their actions flow through them without turbulence. They are who they are. Similarly, there is a cactus standing by a pathway in last summer's desert. I learn from it about the existence with seemingly inadequate resources, and about the simplicity with which spines can repel unwanted intruders. When I know these teachers, I can look within myself and discover some of the potential of my own soul. In the depths of their being they are in step, and from them I too can learn to be in step. However, their teaching is limited, or rather my lesson is: I am not a bird or a cactus, and I cannot learn from them how to eat, how to love, or how to pray as a human being.

So we need new human teachers, and we need old teachings. In this latter respect, the Jewish regimen of the *mitzvot*, the commandments, provides a trustworthy guide. These detailed prescriptions for precise action demand of us that we sharpen our powers of observation and discrimination and self-knowledge. Furthermore, by setting our actions within a larger framework, they provide us with the means to transcend the relationship between subject and object. Let us look for example at the dietary laws. As a religious Jew I am not permitted to eat a piece of meat without verifying that it is indeed part of my particular food chain (chicken and beef are, pork and lobster are not). Furthermore, I must ascertain that the animal it came from was slaughtered and prepared in an appropriate fashion. By complying with these (and other, far more detailed) ritual laws, I learn in the first instance about the animal, its origins, and about the nature of my own actions. But I am also led into examining the significance of the respective lives of the predator and the prey, and the relationship between them. My enquiry extends beyond the "ecological" context, and the rippling

consequences of my act reach the highest levels of being. Ultimately, by eating a morsel of food, I could be performing a sacrament that is as complex and as simple and as holy as the offering of sacrifices in the Temple of old.

Were I an enlightened human being, I, that is, all aspects of my being, would be able to get in step with the totality of the cosmos by eating a single meal with perfect intentionality. But I am not, and my work is unending. I must seek further teachers and true mirrors of my soul and instruction from the Torah in all my tasks, in all my actions, eating, working, talking, loving, learning, teaching, praying.

The day is late. Very shortly the sun will set, and it is almost time for the afternoon prayers. Will I be able to pray with all my being? Will I be in step, and with whom? Where, and who, are my mirrors? Where are the praying teachers of my soul? At one level it is clear that I need a human teacher, a perfected master of prayer, and that I should be part of a perfect devoted community. I found these in the past, but I have set sail back from the holy city and now I live in the land of sensual music. The sages of God's holy fire made me who now I am, but they cannot help me to pray this afternoon. I am out of step again. Nor can I learn from my friends the birds; they know nothing of my exile. I need other mirrors for my soul.

At one level we pray with our physicality. The words are formed in our nervous systems and are uttered by our mouths. Prayers are articulated by the physical organs of speech, and that is entirely proper, for we worship with the totality of our being. Furthermore, the skills of corporeal prayer are acquired and perfected like other physical activities, with practice and discipline. But the words, the movements, the emotions, the hopes and the petitions that are the external characteristics of prayer are not its content—they are the vehicle in which it is borne. The essence of prayer is an extremely subtle yet powerful energy by means of which an individual relates to the Divine that is beyond. The source of prayer, that aspect of our being from which it flows, is within the soul itself. Without the vehicles, without the outer forms of prayer, the essence tends to remain chaotic, incoherent; it is like the scattered' light that fills a room, and not like a beam of light that traverses space and can pierce the gloom. But the soul is

separate from the body, and its energy does not move naturally into the vehicles, and so we have been given a special organ that coordinates the outpouring of prayer and the formation of the vehicles. This organ, the prayer center of our being, must also learn from without. It too needs mirrors, of two kinds: the first in order to discover and to recognize itself, to know its source and its power; and the second, in order that it can be aligned externally, that it may be in step with beings whose essence is praying perfectly. These mirrors are, in the first case, the souls of every living and inanimate being, and in the second, the seraphs, the angels, and the holy creatures, which exist in the second and third realms of emanation.

We are dealing here with very subtle, almost invisible entities. Souls are veiled. It is said that were they to be revealed, the light would be so intense that we would no longer be able to see the phenomenal, the "real" world. They are, perhaps, that of which it is said, "No man can look upon My face and live." Paradoxically, then, our task involves seeing that which is either invisible, or is so bright that it would blind or kill us. How is this to be done? An answer has been given to us. Though we cannot look upon these entities, the souls of all beings, in the sense of apprehending them, knowing them, we can gain glimpses of them by relating to them through the modality of the commandments. We do not see them unveiled, but, rather, through the veil. Their light is partially revealed to us, and it illuminates and becomes a mirror of our own souls. And then, for an instant, we see the entire creation as a myriad shimmering mirrors of God. He is in His heaven, and the world is filled with His glory. The world is His glory. Then we must pray with the angels.

The central element of all Jewish prayer—that which in the legal texts is called simply "The Prayer"—is an ancient compilation of blessings, praises, and thanksgivings. Its verses are a perfect vehicle for the essence of prayer. They have served as such for thousands of years, and in their content they summon up and balance all parts of a person's being: furthermore, they direct us so clearly and consciously toward the Most High.

In morning and afternoon services, when The Prayer is said publicly, it is read twice: first silently, by all participants, and then aloud, by the prayer-

leader. And during this second reading there is an inclusion, a section that is regarded as the highest point of Jewish worship. In this section, called the "Sanctification," humans join higher beings—whom we cannot see, whom we cannot hear—in a marvelous contrapuntal song of praise to the Most High.

Although there are different versions of the Sanctification, in its most common, formal structure, it is an antiphonal chant. It consists of an introduction and invocations that are chanted by the prayer leader, and three biblical verses, derived from prophetic visions of angels, that are sung by the congregation.

The leader prompts and the participants echo the angels.

Leader:

We sanctify Your Name in the world even as they sanctify it in the highest heavens, as it is written by Your prophet: And they said to one another:

Congregation:

*Holy Holy Holy is the Lord of Hosts; The whole earth is filled with His Glory!*  
(Isaiah 6:3)

Leader:

Those opposite them say "Blessed"—

Congregation:

*Blessed be the Glory of the Lord from His abode* (Ezekiel 3:12)

Leader:

And in Your Holy Scriptures it is written—

Congregation:

*The Lord reigns forever Your God, O Zion, in all generations Hallelu-yah*  
(Psalm 146:10)

The world shimmered with God's glory this afternoon, and during the Sanctification I did pray with the angels. I did not see them, I could not hear them, but I joined them in singing the music of the spheres. They sang

perfectly, and I, as usual, was out of tune. This is the cosmic symphony. I am still out of step, but I am part of the parade.