

Hasidic Koans on Tefilah

Source Sheet by Larry Magarik

A. *Koan*: a term in Zen Buddhism meaning a story, dialogue, question, statement or paradox to provoke doubt and test one's spiritual progress.

B. Tzavaat Harivash, attributed to the **Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760)**

1. To pray out loudly stimulates kavanah, but you must learn and train yourself to pray with a soft voice and to cry out silently (33)

2. You pray very quickly because the love of God burns very strongly in your heart and words flow from your mouth by themselves (36)

3. Pray out of the siddur when you are on a low level. When attached to the Supernal World, close your eyes (40)

C. From Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: The Early and Later Masters (1947/8)

1. **Avraham the Angel** (d. 1776, son of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch)

Strategic Retreat

Rabbi Abraham said: "I have learned a new form of service from the wars of Frederick, king of Prussia. It is not necessary to approach the enemy in order to attack him. In fleeing from him, it is possible to circumvent him as he advances, and fall on him from the rear until he is forced to surrender. What is needed is not to strike straight at Evil but to withdraw to the sources of divine power, and from there to circle around Evil, bend it, and transform it into its opposite."

2. **Shalom Shakhna** (d. 1802, grandson of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch)

With the Same Passion

It is written: "A Psalm of David," and following: "...after he had gone in to Bathsheba." [Psalm 51:1] This is how Rabbi Shalom expounded the verse: "David returned to God and said his psalm to him with the same passion with which he had gone to Bathsheba. That is why God forgave him on the instant."

3. Israel of Rizhyn (d. 1850, son of Shalom Shakhna)

The Counterruse

Several mitnagdim [*opponents of Hasidism*] of Sanok came to the rabbi of Rizhyn when he was passing through their city, and complained to him: “In our congregation we pray at dawn, and after that we sit wrapped in our prayer shawls, with our phylacteries [*tefilin*] on head and arm, and learn a chapter of the Mishnah. Not so the hasidim! They prayer after the hour set for prayer has passed, and when they have finished praying they sit down together and drink schnapps. And yet they are called the ‘devout’ and we the ‘adversaries.’”

Leib, the rabbi of Rizhyn’s servant, was seized with an irresistible desire to laugh as he listened to this complaint, and not troubling to conceal the reason for his laughter, he said: “The service and prayer of the mitnagdim are ice-cold and have no warmth at all, just like a corpse, and when you watch by the side of a body you study the chapter from the Mishnah prescribed for this occasion. But when the hasidim have done their bit of service, their heart glows and is warm like one who is alive, and whoever is alive must drink schnapps.”

The rabbi said: ‘We’ll let the jest pass. But the truth of the matter is this: You know that ever since the day our Temple was destroyed, we pray instead of making sacrifices. And just as the sacrifice was disqualified if the thought was impure, so it is with prayer. That is why the Evil Urge devises ruse upon ruse to confuse him who prays with thoughts alien to prayer. Now for this the hasidim have invented a counter-ruse. After praying they sit down together and drink to one another. ‘To life!’ Each tells what is burdening his hear and then they say to one another: ‘May God grant your desire!’ And since – so our sages say – prayers can be said in any language whatsoever, this speaking and answering of theirs while drinking is also regarded as prayer. But all the Evil Urge sees is that they are eating and drinking and using everyday speech, and so he stops bothering his head about them.’”

D. The Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859), adapted from Simcha Raz, ed. The Sayings of Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1995)

1. Follow this rule: one who does not see *Ha-Makom* [literally “The Place,” or God] in *every* place, will not see God in *any* place.

2. “*And you shall love the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 6:5).*” Whom do you really love, God or yourself? Is it possible that your love of God is only love of your self; or perhaps, you love God because you anticipate from God some benefit, either in this world or in the world to come?

3. Silence is the finest of sounds.

4. There is nothing more whole than a broken heart, and nothing straighter than a crooked ladder.

5. "*The gates of tears are never closed (B. Berakhot 32b).*" If the gates are never closed, why were they established? What purpose do they serve? The gates are closed to the tears of fools, who weep over things that are not worth being cried over.

D. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity (1996)

1. The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God. (107)

2. ...[P]raise rather than petition ranks foremost. It is the more profound form, for it involves not so much the sense of one's own dependence and privation as the sense of God's majesty and glory. (111)

3. A revision of the prayerbook will not solve the crisis of prayer. What we need is a review of the soul, a new heart rather than a new text. (120)

4. Let us pray the way we talk. (122)

5. Spiritual problems cannot be solved by administrative techniques. (103)