

Go Right

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God's grace consists precisely in this:

God wants to let God's self be won by men and women. God places God's self, so to speak, into people's hands. God wants to come into this world but God wants to come into it through men and women. God dwells wherever men and women let Godin.
Martin Buber

Brothers and sisters often offer good advice to me in times of personal crisis. Yet, it is sometimes hard for me to take it and apply it to my life. The straight truth is such a bitter medicine that I refuse it. Yet the same message is often conveyed much more forcefully in a story-sugar-coated medicine, if you will. The Jewish Hasidic tradition is one of the richest traditions from which I pull stories for my personal inspiration and guidance. One story in particular has been meaningful in the past year, meaning different things to me at various times. It is the story of how one of the great holy men came to be a great holy man.

Someone asked, "How did you become the great holy man of prayer?"

He answered, "I want you to know that when I was fourteen years old I got married. People in those days got married when they were very young. As a wedding gift my father-in-law made me this special present of a prayer shawl. It was the most beautiful prayer shawl I had ever seen. I really vowed to God that whenever I put it on I would have the most pure thoughts; I would never think an impure thought when I had the special prayer robe on.

"Where I was living I would wake up at five in the morning, run to the synagogue, study for two or three hours, pray, sometimes eat, and by two or three in the afternoon I would already have studied eight or ten hours. Everybody knew that you only prayed late in the afternoon because it took hours and hours to prepare yourself for prayer.

"One afternoon someone walked in at three o'clock, and by the way he walked in I could tell this guy was a cosaka (holy man). He said to me, 'Hey, listen young man, can I borrow your prayer shawl?' I said, 'It is three in the afternoon and you haven't prayed yet?' He answered, 'I didn't come here to ask for your advice. Can I use your shawl already?'

"When someone asks you to give them your prayer shawl, you have to give it. How can you say, no I won't give you my prayer shawl? So I had to give it to him, but I couldn't control myself. I said, 'Listen, I

want you to know that I just got married and this was a gift from my father-in-law. I swore to myself that I would only think pure thoughts when I wear this prayer shawl.' Imagine you've made this vow before God to have only holy thoughts and this guy looks at you and says, 'Okay, good. So give it to me already.'

"So he puts on the prayer shawl. You know it is late in the afternoon and I assume that this person had really prepared himself to pray and that he is going to pray like crazy now. He might cry like a dog, and who knows, he might even jump right out of his skin. I was ready to see the greatest show in the world. "Do you know what happened? He puts on the prayer shawl and walks to the window that overlooks the market place where people are buying onions and potatoes and things, and he stands there for an hour. I got the creeps. Who knows what he thinks while he is standing there. Every second I wanted to run up and tear off my prayer shawl. But, anyway, I didn't. I just didn't. Finally, after one hour, really, I was so shaky inside because I didn't know what he was thinking while he was wearing my prayer shawl. Suddenly, he goes to the holy ark and opens it. I thought, 'Now the show begins. I'm really going to see some praying like mad.' The only thing he did was put his head into the holy ark. You know, if you rattle off your prayers in the morning very fast, it should take 10-15 minutes. This person put his head into the holy ark maybe four minutes and he was finished.

"What a fake, right? Fooling around until four in the afternoon, then looking out in the market place and all he does is pray four minutes. I couldn't control myself any longer. This was the end. I rushed up to him and tore off my prayer shawl... Now... open your heart strings: The prayer shawl was soaking wet with tears, soaking. Was I ashamed. It was an ordinary Wednesday. I never prayed like that on the highest of holy days. I said, 'I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. But just tell me what you were doing looking out the window for an hour.' "'Come, I'll show you; he said. 'Do you see there on the outside there are some soldiers having their basic training. What is a soldier anyway? A little drunkard, right? What is the officer? A bigger drunkard. So the bigger drunkard says to the little drunkards, go right. Would the soldiers dream of going left?

Right is right and left is left. And imagine a high officer, imagine a general, would come who is the biggest drunkard in the world and he would say, go right. And they would kill themselves to go right. And they might commit suicide a thousand times over but they would go right. And here I was standing on Mt. Sinai, the dwelling place of God, and I hear God's voice telling me to go right... and I am still going left. Why am I going left all the time? Then I began to pray... '

"He says to me, 'Don't worry. Your prayer shawl will dry.' By this time I couldn't control myself anymore, and I began crying like mad. I said, 'I don't ever want my prayer shawl to be dry again.' Then he looked at me and began hugging me and said, 'Young man, do you want to learn how to pray? Then pack up your things and I will take you to see the holy master.'"

This story has had different meanings to me at different times in my life, and yet it has always re-stimulated my desire for a mystical experience with God. I don't know what it is that I expect-perhaps something like a burning bush or vision. I have longed for such experiences many times in my life. Yet I have not experienced them. This is not to say that I haven't experienced God, only that I haven't had this other-worldly kind of experience. And the more I longed for such an experience and worked for it through long and tedious prayer conditions, fasting or other such conditions, I was always disappointed, and sometimes even disillusioned and doubtful. But, in my waiting and listening, I have found that God is asking me to find Him not in the mystical experience but in my relationships with other people.

Through all of these searchings I have had a poster on my wall which says: "You must cultivate the attitude that every moment of your life is for other people. SMM" Yet, it never made an impression on me that this was the way to find God. Actually, it made the greatest impression on me when it fell down and I didn't get around to putting it back up. Then I would look at the empty space and recall the words. When I put it up again, I never noticed it.

But these words of Father's have taken on special meaning as I have had experiences of finding God in brothers and sisters. Sometimes it came through my sacrificing to reach out to others, but the most profound experiences have come when I have allowed others to reach out to me. It is much easier for me to love others than to believe that others or even God could love me. The amazing thing to me is that as I am learning to believe that I am lovable, I am finding it easier and easier to turn right, so to speak. It is easier to hear God's voice and to want to respond through a kind of mutual love. As Buber says, "God dwells wherever men and women let God in."