Ze Keili V'Anvehu: Reclaiming a Personal God

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This piece was originally presented at the JOFA Conference, Plenary Address on Spirituality, March 14, 2010. It appears in issue 9 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I'd like to begin by quoting to you a passage from Rabbi David Hartman, from his book, *The Living Covenant.* He writes:

Traditional Judaism has always contained a vital dialectic between ["*Ze Keli v'anvehu*"] "This is my God and I will adore Him" and ["*Elokei avi v'aromimehu*[DEA2]"] "The God of my father and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2). Loyalty to the God about Whom our fathers told us does not exclude the discovery of new insights and experiences that lead one to say, "This is *my* God." The past does not exhaust all that is possible within one's covenantal relationship with God. When Moses asks God how he should announce God's "name" to the community, he is told to say that he was sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also the God Who is worshipped through the new possibilities that the future may uncover: "I will be what I will be" ["*Eheyeh asher eheyeh*"]. One loyal to Sinai does not only look backward. (*Living Covenant*, 8–9)

In the past year and years, members of the JOFA community and its sympathizers have made great strides taking ownership over and elevating "*elokei avinu.*" We have appropriated the Torah of our fathers into our own *batei midrash*, adding the Torah of our mothers. We've gotten to know the God mediated through Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov—and countless other men—as we shared our own voices, and those of our matriarchs, through learning and through ritual. We have faithfully inherited our tradition, struggled with it where necessary, and have—to a large degree—rendered it accessible to girls and women everywhere. While there is certainly work yet to be done, we have widened the halakhic path, so that all members of the Jewish community who want to can participate in the ongoing journey from Sinai. In so doing, we have certainly exalted God.

Yet, with gratitude for all that we have accomplished and with a strong awareness for the battles that remain, I would like to pose a different question: Have we taken sufficient time or made sufficient space for "*Ze keli*"? Has all the permission and all the inclusion helped us in the project of identifying and reifying a personal God? With all our holy and rightful reverence for our past, are we any more capable of opening ourselves to the unfolding of *Eheyeh*, of a self and a God in the process of becoming? To what might we point and say, "This is *my* God"?

Hartman's concern accents the temporal—Can the God of our past be made present? My concern accents the spiritual—Can God, as mediated through our tradition, be made personal?

I am charged with the task today of addressing the nexus of spirituality and Orthodox feminism. I come to you not as a guru or even as an enlightened practitioner; not as a rabbi nor as a rabbah, but simply as a woman, Jewish educator, and seeker eminently committed to expanding the possibilities for religious life in the Modern Orthodox community. I want to enlarge the sphere of our religious concern, to place at the center of our religious discourse and our religious experience the cultivation of spirit.

To give shape to this call, I'd like to sketch for you two entry-points to spirituality—two among many, no doubt—that are captured by the phrase, "*Ze keli*," "This is my God." Recall that these words are part of *shirat haYam,* the song sung after the splitting of the Red Sea, in celebration of the miraculous liberation from Egypt. Rashi, quoting the Mehilta, famously writes on these words:

God revealed Godself in His glory to [the Israelites], and they pointed at God with their finger. By the sea, [even] a maidservant perceived what prophets did not perceive.

What was available to all of *Benei Yisrael*—and *Benot Yisrael*—at the moment of great salvation was the gift of transparency: *Ze keli.* They could point to their immediate experience and say, "*This* is the hand of God." After years of toil in the land of Egypt, after generations in which God was eclipsed from their lives, they were blessed with a moment of absolute clarity. They could perceive with certainty the urgent, unmistakable presence of a God who heard their cries and who delivered.

I submit to you that one central impulse in the spiritual quest is the longing to be able to say "*Ze,* "—that is, to encounter God in ways that are immediate, powerful, palpable; to invite experiences of *kedusha,* or of *devekut,* that fill a person with awareness of transcendence. The spirituality of "*ze keli*" demands a relationship with the divine that is intense, real, urgent. It asserts that there is a live Other to whom one can point.

How? In the absence of sea-splitting pyrotechnics that testify to God's *power*, we might yearn in our times for more subtle moments that testify to God's *presence*. "*Ahat sha'alti me'et Hashem ota avakesh: Shivti beBeit Hashem kol yimei hayyay, lahazot beNoam Hashem u'livaker beHekhalo,*" says the Psalmist, a seeker of God if ever there was one. "I ask one thing of God: Let me sit in Your home all the days of my life, to see your glory and to visit your inner sanctum" (Psalm 27:4). We cannot hope for supernatural miracles that will lift the veil of the world. That is not the reality in which we live. We can, however, try to sit quietly with sanctity and even to encounter deep holiness from time to time. The cry of "*shivti beBeit Hashem*" reminds us that spirituality—so often associated with experiences of ecstasy—can also just be found in the simplicity of everyday living, of sitting with what comes our way and dwelling with God there. Only then might we be blessed with a visit to the *hekhal,* to the place of innermost depths.

This is one way that we might reclaim "*ze keli*"—through the cultivation of a compelling relationship with God. Just as our ancestors could see God at the sea, so our generation is charged to figure out, where is it that *we* see God? As individuals and as a community, what might we do—

- what spiritual practices might we adopt?
- what intentions might we set?
- what spaces might we share?
- what texts might we learn and *how* might we learn them?
- what prayers might we pray?
- what goals might we privilege?

—that will allow us best to dwell in the house of God? What are the religious pathways that will speak to our souls? What will be *our* avenues to the *hekhal*?

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Beyond the explicitly spiritual agenda of getting to know a God to whom one can point, there is a second dimension to "*ze keli*" spirituality. Experiences like the kind at the Red Sea rarely last, of course. It is not the nature of the divine mystery to remain disclosed. The moment that *Benei Yisrael* exit the miraculous space—literally and figuratively—they are struck with fear, with a lack of trust in their future. They worry about whether the God who just dramatically and spectacularly saved them from their enemies can also sustain their humdrum, everyday needs. "*Ma nishte*?" they ask (Exodus 15:24). What will we drink in the desert? What will we eat? In other words, what will nourish us now? No amount of spiritual enlightenment could save them from the vulnerability of being human.

A second impulse in the spiritual life can be located here, not in the ascent to the divine, but in the descent to all that is inescapably human. In those moments when life—in all of its complexity—intrudes and awakens and unsettles, *those* are the moments when we might open to a world beyond—beyond self, beyond what we thought, maybe beyond words. It is a strange truth that when we feel most raw and vulnerable, when our skin is thinned by the wild unpredictability of the world, we are that much more available to the touch of the other. Like a body burned by the sun, we *feel* more—more fear, but also more tenderness. "*MiMa'amakim keratikha yah,*" "From the depths, I call out to God"—not just from the place of despair, but from within the arresting grip of life laid bare.

Joy *and* pain, fulfillment *and* disappointment, compel the deepest, hardest, most fundamental existential questions:

- In what can I trust?
- For what am I grateful?
- How can I cope with loss?
- How can I honor love?
- What is intimacy?
- For whom or what shall I sacrifice?
- Where does my integrity lay?
- How can I live in the face of fear, uncertainty, and doubt?

Like *Benei Yisrael* thirsting for water in the desert, we too might wonder: What will nourish me?

I submit, it is the task of spirituality to take on these challenges too, not to answer them, but to help us live *without* answers; to help us cope with and embrace mystery; to live in the world as it really is. A Jewish path that accents these questions seeks to reframe the stories we tell ourselves. It seeks to help us make meaning out the mess of our colorful, wonderful, unpredictable, uneven existence. It seeks to help each and every one of us to find our way toward a God that is truly our own. *Ze Keli.* This is *my* God—a God who speaks to *my* personal issues, *my* deepest needs, the cravings and confusions of *my* own soul.

For this task, the language of halakha alone won't do. Seekers of these forms of spirituality need a wider, more varied pathway—through Aggadah, Midrash, Mussar, Hassidut; through prayer, meditation, song, and silence; through modalities of religious engagement that are neither systematic nor systematizing in their nature. To meet the cries of our explosive, expressive souls, we're going to need to privilege those texts, those teachers, and those techniques that help reify God in the world, and in the core of our beings.

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Is this a project for Orthodox feminists? Absolutely. As a community that has valiantly fought to expand ritual access, leadership roles, learning opportunities, and social justice, it is our *duty* to clarify

what it is that animates these struggles altogether, what mission under girds the religious life, and what makes the effort worth it. It is also our *privilege*—the privilege won from years on the periphery—to speak to the core and to enlarge and elevate the conversation, to expand the possibilities for a spiritually vibrant existence for all Jews.

Let us be not just inheritors of tradition, but active shapers of it. As we honor *Elokei avinu veImenu,* let us commit—today and always—to cultivating lives full of a profoundly present and personally meaningful God, so that each one of us might be blessed to say, "*Ze keli veAnvehu.*"

[DEA1]Keli? Or Eli?
[DEA2]V'aromemenhu?