

Pots, Pans, & Seraphim: Messianic Jewish Prayer in its Heavenly Context

Mark S. Kinzer

Hashivenu Forum 2017

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The *Kedushah* Perspective

In 1899 an English missionary derided Judaism as “a dry husk from which all semblance of real spiritual life has departed.” Judaism is a contemptible “*religion of pots and pans*.”¹ Nearly ninety years later Jacob Neusner published a volume in which he adopted this vivid culinary image as a badge of honor.² Neusner saw the phrase as especially applicable to the Mishnah, which “does not speak of sacred symbols but of *pots and pans*...of ordinary things, of things which everyone must have known...this language...expresses a deeply embedded ontology and methodology of the sacred—specifically of the sacred within the secular...”³ In a similar vein Max Kadushin described the experience of God in rabbinic Judaism as “normal mysticism”: “Normal mysticism enables a person to make normal, commonplace, recurrent situations and events occasions for worship. The food he eats, the water he drinks, the dawn and twilight are joined to *berakhot* acknowledging God’s love. These daily commonplace situations are not only interpreted in the act of worship as manifestations of God’s love, but they arouse in the individual, in the same act of worship, a poignant sense of the nearness of God.”⁴

The comments of Neusner and Kadushin offer penetrating insight into Jewish spiritual life. Judaism seeks to elevate the humble physical activities of daily existence by setting them in the context of divine blessing. Nevertheless, this down-to-earth perspective represents only one pole of Jewish spiritual life. There is also a more exotic side to that life—one that is no less deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, and no less central to our liturgy. If the *berakhot* for food and drink represent “normal mysticism,” the *kedushah* exemplifies this more ecstatic pole of spiritual engagement. The *kedushah* evokes the angelic worship described by the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, and appears three times in the daily morning service. It underlines the linkage between Israel’s earthly liturgy and the angelic praise in heaven. This heavenly dimension of Jewish prayer—understood in relation to the high priestly service of the resurrected and ascended Messiah—is the focus of this paper.

One can gain a glimpse of the significance of the *kedushah* to many of our ancestors by looking at its role in the tradition known as *merkavah* mysticism. Here is a vivid passage from a *merkavah* text known as *Hekhalot Rabbati*, in which the speaker is the God of Israel.

Blessed unto heaven and earth are they who descend to the Merkavah
when you tell and make known to my sons
what I do during the morning prayer, during the Minha and the evening prayer,
every day and at every hour,
when Israel says before me “holy.”
Teach them and tell them:
Raise your eyes to the heaven opposite your house of prayer
at the hour when you say before me “holy.”

For I have no joy in my entire eternal house, which I created,
except at that hour,
in which your eyes are raised to my eyes
and my eyes are raised to your eyes,
(namely) at the hour in which you say before me “holy.”

Bear witness to them of what testimony you see in me
regarding what I do to the countenance of Jacob, your father,
which is engraved unto me upon the throne of my glory.
For at the hour when you say before me “holy,”
I bend down over it,
caress, kiss and embrace it,
and my hands (lie) upon his arms,
three times, when you say before me “holy,”
as it is said: Holy, holy, holy (Isa. 6:3).⁵

Peter Schäfer summarizes the message that this *merkavah* mystic brings to his community: “God is there, up in heaven; I have seen him, and he still loves us more than anything else. When we, in our synagogues, sing the Qedushah, he not only listens to us, he embraces and kisses us through the image of our father Jacob/Israel, who is engraved on his throne in perpetual memory of God’s unceasing love for us.”⁶

Moreover, the *kedushah* recited by Israel takes precedence over that recited by the angels. Each morning before dawn God speaks to the *chayot* (the living beings) who support the divine throne, directing them to still the voices of the heavenly powers so that God can hear the prayers of the *shachrit* service that rise from synagogues on earth. “Silence for me the voice of the creatures that I created, (namely) every individual angel and every individual Seraph, every individual Holy Creature and every individual Ofan that I created until I can hear and hearken to the beginning of all the hymns and praises and prayers and the pleasant chant of Israel’s songs.”⁷ As Schäfer notes, “There is no doubt that when it comes to the morning prayer, God wishes to concentrate on Israel, and not on the heavenly host... Only when the angels in heaven have heard Israel’s prayer on earth are they able to join in with their Qedushah from above.”⁸ The choreography of this cosmic dance demonstrates the superiority of Israel to the angels. “Despite his fondness for the holy creatures in particular, when it comes to Israel, God makes it unmistakably clear once more that his real love is for Israel and Israel alone.”⁹

The synagogue *kedushah* and the *merkavah* traditions both have their roots in the pre-70 liturgy of the Jerusalem temple. This is the case even for Isaiah’s vision which is the basis of the *kedushah*. As Jon Levenson remarks, “The relevant point about this justly famous passage is that it occurs in the Temple... The earthly Temple is thus the vehicle that conveys the prophet into the supernal Temple, the real Temple, the Temple of YHWH and his retinue, and not merely the artifacts that suggest them. This Temple is an institution common to the heavenly and terrestrial realms; they share it.”¹⁰ The Holy of Holies functioned much like the magical wardrobe in the Narnia Chronicles: it was a point of intersection between two worlds. Those worshipping on

earth were partners with those worshipping in heaven. The temple was destroyed in 70 CE, but Israel's consciousness of its link to heaven and the angelic liturgy endured.

Sadly, most western Jews have lost this consciousness. Even those whose faith in God is strong and vibrant tend to dismiss talk of angels and heavenly liturgy as a mythological compromise of divine transcendence. As a result, the spiritual imagination of many Jews has become impoverished. And without a rich spiritual imagination, fed by images from scripture and the liturgy, Jews will find it difficult to pray consistently with intentionality and intensity (i.e., with *kavannah*).

While most westernized Jews formed by the *Haskalah* have been robbed of this treasure, Hasidism has preserved its consciousness of the link between the liturgy of earth and heaven. The Jewish mystical tradition here continues to nurture the spiritual imagination of praying Jews. Of course, there is much in this tradition that shocks and dismays. But there is also much beauty and truth. Jewish mysticism might be compared to an overgrown bush that needs trimming and shaping, whereas the Judaism of the *Haskalah* could be likened to a finely manicured shrub with sparse and dry foliage.

Adin Steinsaltz's *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* provides a contemporary example of the Jewish mystical tradition presented unapologetically as matter-of-fact truth.¹¹ Three features of this volume are noteworthy. First, Steinsaltz emphasizes the complex nature of reality, which consists of worlds within worlds: "The physical world in which we live, the objectively observed universe around us, is only a part of an inconceivably vast system of worlds... What is more, the various worlds interpenetrate and interact in such a way that they can be considered counterparts of one another..."¹² We might quibble with the detailed description he provides of those worlds, but he rightly recognizes that the world perceivable by our senses is only a sliver of what actually exists. Second, Steinsaltz considers the Jerusalem temple to be "a symbolic model" of this complex system of worlds.¹³ Moreover, this "model" does not merely symbolize the interconnected realms of reality—it also serves as the geographical point at which those realms intersect: "[T]he Holy of Holies is the place of the revelation of the divine glory, the point of contact, or of intersection, among the different worlds and between one level of existence and another. The Holy of Holies is therefore a point situated in our world and other worlds at the same time."¹⁴ Finally, Steinsaltz asserts that the human soul participates in the divine nature, and is thus a rightful inhabitant of the highest of the worlds: "In its profoundest being, the soul of man is a part of the Divine and, in this respect, is a manifestation of God in the world. To be sure, the world as a whole may be viewed as a divine manifestation, but the world remains as something else than God, while the soul of man, in its depths, may be considered to be a part of God. Indeed, only man, by virtue of his divine soul, has the potential, and some of the actual capacity, of God Himself."¹⁵ This last feature of *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* may be the most unsettling of the three for those educated in the tradition of Maimonides and the *Haskalah*, but it plays a central role in the stream of Jewish mystical discourse.

Yeshua, Our *Shaliach Tzibur*

My topic in this paper is Messianic Jewish prayer as participation in the life of God. As can be seen from what has already been stated, there is much in the Jewish mystical tradition that is relevant to this topic. At the same time, the core reality at the heart of Messianic Jewish prayer transcends the spiritual teaching of traditional Judaism—while also remaining largely unintelligible apart from that tradition. The core reality of Messianic Jewish prayer is our union with Messiah Yeshua, and our praying with, in, and through him.

Since the Arian crisis of the fourth century ecclesial prayer has increasingly taken Yeshua—or the Triune God which includes Yeshua—as the party addressed in worship. In the process, the *ekklesia* tended to lose sight of Yeshua as one who himself prayed before his death, and who continues to pray in his resurrected and ascended state. No Christian theologian has articulated this point more clearly or forcefully than Thomas Torrance:

Stress upon the deity of Christ, in reaction to Arianism, prompted incorporation into the liturgies of formal prayers to Christ who as Lord receives our prayer and as Mediator bestows divine gifts upon us. Here at first we have a change from prayer through the mediation of Christ the High Priest in the full sense, to prayer on the basis of his high-priestly work. Liturgically expressed, this meant a substitution of prayer for Christ's sake (*dia Christon*) for prayer through Christ (*dia Christou*). That is, prayer motivated by Christ tends to displace prayer through the human priesthood of Jesus, regarded himself as a worshipper of God.¹⁶

I first read the essays of Torrance on this topic in the 1980s, and they left a lasting impression on both my thinking and my prayer. To worship God *in* Yeshua meant to worship *with* Yeshua.

We see this pattern expressed throughout the Apostolic Writings. The book of Hebrews presents Yeshua as the triumphant son of David who fulfills Psalm 22 by praising the divine name in the midst of the congregation of Israel (Hebrews 2:12; see Psalm 22:22). Similarly, the letter to the Romans envisions Yeshua as fulfilling another Psalm of David (i.e., Psalm 18) by praising God among the gentiles (Romans 15:9; see Psalm 18:49). These texts assume that the ascended Yeshua functions as a heavenly *shaliach tzibbur*, leading the worship of the people of Israel and those gentiles who now serve the God of Israel. This is also the assumption of the book of Revelation, which describes the Lamb as standing on Mount Zion with the hundred forty-four thousand and leading them in singing a “new song” (Revelation 14:1-4), which in the following chapter is called “the song of the Lamb” (Revelation 15:3). Since this song is compared to “the song of Moses”—a song that was sung *by* Moses, as choirmaster of Israel, rather than *to* Moses (Exodus 15:1)—we may conclude that “the song of the Lamb” is a song sung *by* Yeshua rather than *to* Yeshua.¹⁷

Just as the risen Yeshua leads the chorus of praise, so he also *intercedes* for his brothers and sisters on earth who strive to be faithful as he was faithful (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:24-25). We “draw near to God *through* him” (Hebrews 7:25), for he prays to his Father on our behalf. But we also draw near to God *with* him, for Yeshua dwells among us and within us by his Spirit, *interceding* in, with, and through us “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). Yeshua intercedes for us at the right hand of God, and also intercedes through us on earth by his Spirit. As Torrance puts it, “While we do not know how to pray or what to pray as we ought, the ascended High Priest sends us his own Spirit who helps us in our weakness by making the prayers and intercessions of Christ inaudibly to echo in our stammering in such a way that our prayers and intercessions become a participation in his before the throne of the Father in heaven.”¹⁸ Just as the praises of God sung by Yeshua on high echo in our hearts by his Spirit, so also do his cries for mercy on behalf of a creation longing to be free from its bondage to decay.

The union of our prayer with the prayer of Yeshua expresses an even more basic reality: Yeshua empowers us by his Spirit to share in his intimate filial relationship with the Holy One. “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:15b-16). We call upon God in the same way that Yeshua himself did (Mark 14:36) because Yeshua dwells among us by his Spirit.¹⁹

The risen Yeshua prays because he remains a human being, a Jewish man born of a Jewish woman. That is why he can function as our *kohen gadol* and *shaliach tzibur*, and his prayer can become our prayer. However, Yeshua is also the divine *Memra* (Word) made flesh. As the *sefirot* are to *Eyn Sof*, so is the *Memra* to God, the hidden source of all. From his birth Yeshua bore within him the power of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16) which enabled him to triumph over death. This makes Yeshua higher than the *serafim*, the *ofanim*, the *chayot*, and all other angelic beings. Because he is one of us and yet also exalted above the angels, he is able to exalt us with him above the angels. In him our *kedushah* is indeed more precious to God than that of the seraphim, and we are *divinized*. However, this is not because our soul is *inherently* divine (as Steinsaltz contends), but because God has done the unexpected and unimagined by graciously making us partakers of the divine nature in the Messiah (2 Peter 1:4).

This is the best explanation for the paradoxical fact that Yeshua is pictured as interceding *beside* (i.e., sitting; Romans 8:34) rather than *before* God (i.e., standing). Even a high priest remains but a courtier of the royal divinity, and must express his inferior status through spatial location and upright posture. But Yeshua is both priest and king, sharing in the divine sovereignty. Therefore, he fulfills his priestly role from a position of royal dignity. He remains a human being, a Jew, and so he prays. But he also constitutes the eternal image of the invisible God, and so his prayer is authoritative rather than obsequious.

We now participate in his relationship with God by the gift of the Spirit, and our prayer echoes his. He is with us in the world below, and we are with him in the world above. Residing in our midst by the Spirit as one of us, he “stands”; inhabiting the upper world at the right hand of the Father, he “sits.”

While this is not the place to explain or defend the view, I would propose that Yeshua is present by his Spirit not only in the midst of the *ekklesia*, but also in the midst of the Jewish people. He stands in the midst of each minyan gathered to worship the God of Israel, just as he stands wherever two or three are gathered “in his name.” Thus, the *merkavah* mystics were correct in thinking that Israel’s *kedushah* was more precious to God than that of the angels, though they did not know the real reason; and the kabbalists were correct in considering *Kenneset Yisrael* to be a divine power above the angels.

Cultivating a Healthy Spiritual Imagination

My goal in this short reflection is to feed our spiritual imagination. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of faith as “the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). We activate such faith when we prepare ourselves for liturgical prayer by first imaginatively envisioning who we are and where we stand or sit. We may be in a family room, an office, or a bedroom, a hotel, a social hall, or a synagogue, but we are also in the outer court of the heavenly temple, readying ourselves to enter the presence of the Holy Blessed One. We are part of Yeshua’s earthly temple, and are thus linked to the heavenly realm. Thus, the opening words of the *ashray* apply not only to our ancestors who lived in the days of the Jerusalem temple, but also to us: *ashray yoshvey beitecha*—happy are those who dwell in your house!

Central to the worship imagery presented to us in the letter to the Hebrews is the image of Yeshua as Israel’s *kohen gadol*. This is not a role which Yeshua fulfills only at the moment of his ascension, when he presents his atoning sacrifice to his Father in the heavenly courts, before taking his seat at the right hand of the Holy One. Yeshua will always be the *kohen gadol*, leading all creation in the worship of its Creator. This makes him also our *shaliach tzibur*, our congregational prayer leader. Imagine Yeshua at your side, in your midst, leading the chorus of praise, and crying out in prayers of intercession. Imagine your prayers as mingled with his, or as his echoes, and in this way as inserted into the inner conversation of the divine “world.” Yeshua stands with us, but we also sit with him.

In the past months I have been preparing for my daily recitation of *shachrit*, *minchah*, and *ma’ariv* by reading the meditation developed for this purpose by First Fruits of Zion:

I hereby join myself to the Master, Yeshua the Messiah, the righteous one, who is the bread of life and the true light, the source of eternal salvation for all those who hear him. Like a branch that remains in a vine, so may I remain in him, just as he also remains in the Father and the Father in him, in order that they may remain in us. May the grace of the Master, Yeshua the Messiah, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit abound to us.²⁰

I have found this to be a helpful way to remember that all my prayers are offered through and in Yeshua. The meditation does not speak explicitly of Yeshua as the leader of our prayer, nor does it evoke the imagery of the heavenly temple that I deem so important. But it does involve an act of intentionally binding myself to Yeshua, and all else flows from that reality.

Judaism is indeed “a religion of pots and pans,” and Neusner is right to see this as a sign of its beauty and truth. But finding “the sacred in the secular” means encountering that which is exalted in the midst of that which is humble, of finding that which is heavenly in the midst of that which is mundane. The prophet Zechariah anticipates a day when “every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts” (14:21). That day has already begun. As our tradition recognizes, every Jewish home is a temple, every table an altar, and every meal a sacrificial banquet. The ordinary activities of daily life—including our groggy caffeine-empowered morning prayers—are taken up into a sacred drama where earth and heaven meet. May our half-opened eyes be awakened to these worlds within worlds, so that we may conduct ourselves with reverence and awe in the courts of the heavenly king.

¹ Reverend W.T. Gidney, “Christian Missions to Israel,” *The Missionary Review of the World*, Volume 22.

² Jacob Neusner, *A Religion of Pots and Pans? Modes of Philosophical and Theological Discourse in Ancient Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

³ Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: Introduction and Reader* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992), 13-14. Emphasis added.

⁴ Max Kadushin, *Worship and Ethics: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Bloch, 1963), 168.

⁵ Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 260-61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 264-65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁰ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 122-23.

¹¹ Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose: A Discourse on the Essence of Jewish Existence and Belief* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980).

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene: Wipf&Stock, 1996; originally published in 1976), 115-16.

¹⁷ Revelation also features an angelic hymn sung to the Lamb (5:8-14), but the imagery of Revelation 14-15 suggests that the Lamb in these chapters is himself the singer.

¹⁸ Torrance, 213-14.

¹⁹ As Torrance states, “That is what it means to pray in Christ’s name, so that when we pray the *Our Father* which he has put into our lips, it is the *Abba Father* of Christ himself which cries in us through the Spirit to the Father” (*Ibid.*, 141).

²⁰ Here is the Hebrew text of the meditation:

הַרִינִי מִקֶּשֶׁר עֲצָמַי בְּאֲדוֹן,
 יְשׁוּעַ הַמְּשִׁיחַ הַצְּדִיק,
 שֶׁהוּא לֶחֶם הַחַיִּים וְהָאוֹר הָאֱמֶתִי,
 מִמְּצִיא תְּשׁוּעַת עוֹלָמִים לְכֹל שֹׁמְעָיו.
 כְּמוֹ שְׂרִיג שְׁעוֹמֵד בְּגִנּוֹן, בֶּן אֲנִי אֶעְמּוֹד בּוֹ,
 כְּאִשֶּׁר גַּם הוּא עוֹמֵד בְּאֵב וְהָאֵב בּוֹ,
 כְּדִי שְׂיַעֲמְדוּ בְּנֵי.
 חוֹן הָאֲדוֹן יְשׁוּעַ הַמְּשִׁיחַ וְאַהֲבַת הָאֱלֹהִים
 וְחִבְרַת רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ יִרְבוּ לָנוּ.