

Daily Meditation 4-14-25

Rabbi Heschel & Hildegard of Bingen on Dark Nights & Holiness

Good morning.

I'm recording this on Sunday, which is Palm Sunday for Christians, and the launching of what is called Holy Week. And yesterday, Saturday, was the launching of Passover in the Jewish tradition. And in today's essay, we're reflecting on wisdom from Rabbi Heschel, as well as wisdom from Hildegard von Bingen.

So from Heschel, we learn how humans combat evil, as he says, "with the holy." He says,

A biblical answer to evil is not the good, but the holy. It is an attempt to raise humans to a higher level of existence, where humanity is not alone when confronted with evil, and so the realm of the sacred assists us and supports us, strengthens us.

When you're wrestling with evil, as I've said before, the opposite of evil is not good. The opposite of evil is the sacred — exactly what Heschel is saying.

And he puts a living light in the face of God, bestows on humans the power of love that enables them to overcome powers of evil. The power of love flows from the sacred. And how do we tap into this realm of the sacred and the holy? By way of mitzvah, with deeds.

As he says, "prayer in the form of a deed." That's what a mitzvah is, a prayer in the form of a deed. And this is, in the Creation Spirituality tradition, this is the Via Transformativa. Our work to take on the powers of injustice and lies, powers that we often call demonic or satanic powers. This comes to a head in the Via Transformativa: bring compassion and justice and truth.

He also says that the Via Positiva is the starting point for Jewish consciousness:

Not the realness of evil, not the sinfulness of man, but rather the wonder of creation, and the ability of humans to do the will of God. That capacity we have, is part of the wonder of creation, that we can do great good, even holiness in our works. And this is the ability

of humans to do the will of God. This, too is a marvel, part of the miracle of existence, that we have the intelligence we have, that we have the creativity we have, we have the moral imagination we have, and we can employ it for the good.

Of course, we can employ it to serve forces of evil as well. And that's the point: that human history is not guaranteed. A lot depends on the choices we make and don't make.

Now, Hildegard of Bingen is a big part of our essay this morning too, and I'm celebrating. She employs so many means to talk explicitly about evil, especially in her paintings. And I share with you a beautiful note I got just the other day, in response to the exegesis that I did, and the picture we showed of Hildegard's painting on how the Mystical Body tames the devil. That's this painting here. And it shows that Gold Mountain behind the people, the good people who have enchained the demon down here, Satan, and are actually sitting on him. Check out the legs here. You see these people. And Hildegard celebrates the power of virtue, which overcomes the demonic, and moves us into arenas of wrestling with evil, and with the devil's capacity for deadly plagues, as she puts in poisonous arrows of human pollution. "The multitude shines in faith through their good works," she says.

So here Hildegard is echoing what Rabbi Heschel says — or maybe its the other way around, since Hildegard lived 800 years before Heschel — but they're certainly in full agreement that our good works, this is what keeps the demonic down. It doesn't kill evil, wipe it off the face of the map or out of human history. But it gives us that strength, as she says: "Because they have been fortified with such great strength and firmness in God, these good people are strong enough to resist being befouled by the devil's attacks. Living justly, they grasp holiness."

How thoroughly like Rabbi Heschel are these meditations, teachings from Hildegard of Bingen, and how fitting for the Holy Week that awaits us. As in this Holy Week, things go from the glorious, the singing of "Hosanna" as Jesus rides into the city on a donkey, to the Last Supper on Thursday, and this tremendous invitation of Jesus to be remembered in food and drink and bread and wine, his body and his life force — but also the events that follow the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the crowds that demand that he be crucified, and the crucifixion itself on Good Friday.

And of course, the crucifixion represents, it's really an archetype for evil, because he was a good man. He was a prophet. He was a person of wisdom, and in that way, a son of God who was crucified. It was an ignominious death, which occurred to 1000s, 1000s of innocent people under the empire of that day.

Empires in our day, too, are thoroughly capable of killing innocent people. And the effort today to dismantle Medicaid, which assists the oldest and most vulnerable, the sick, the poorest, handicapped people and children. Medicaid pays for 40% of the births of children in our country. People are trying to dismantle it at this time, with no substitute in mind. The same is true of Social Security, which of course, with money people have put into that account with their many, many years of work. Again, for older people in retirement.

So empires are still wreaking their havoc on good and innocent people. So all these are lessons of this holy time, Passover and of Good Friday, with Easter as a culmination, that a promise that death does not have the last word, and there really is such a thing as justice in this universe.

And interestingly, Rabbi Heschel says this: He says, "There is always an opportunity to do a mitzvah. And precious is life, because at all times and in all places, we are able to do God's will. This is why despair is alien to Jewish faith." That is a deep statement about this sacred week, whether you be a Jew or Christian. And in fact, they are very aligned, because there's no room for despair, even in death, even in the death of innocence, Hope reigns.

Thank you. And a Blessed Easter to everybody.