

About Hershel Matt ...

... on the occasion of his Tenth Yahrzeit -- January 4, 1998

by Joseph G. Rosenstein

Each December for the last dozen years, with only a few exceptions, David Rogoff and I have have traveled to the annual New England retreat of the National Havurah Committee. Nine years ago, that retreat took place at about the time of Rabbi Hershel Matt's first yahrzeit. During the Shabbat morning service, I led the congregation in a guided meditation which I dedicated to Hershel's memory -- and which I have presented in his memory almost every succeeding year.

The meditation is based on a prayer that comes between the opening prayers of the morning service -- pesukei d'zimrah -- and the shacharit service. The prayer begins with the words "nishmat kol chay tevorech at shimcha" -- the soul of every living being shall bless your essence -- and ends with the words "barchi nafshi et adonai, v'chol k'rovay et shem kodsho" -- my soul shall bless you, and all of my innermost being shall bless your holy essence.

In the pesukei d'zimrah, our voices join together with other voices -- all the voices of the universe -- to form a chorus which sings God's praise. But for the shacharit service, each of us must find our own voice -- the solo of our own soul. How do we make that transition, how do we sing halleluyah in our own voice?

When I developed this meditation nine years ago, I based it on two very vivid recollections of Hershel -- one was the intensity with which he chanted Psalm 148 a few pages earlier in the service, and the other was the kavvanah with which he sang barchi nafshi. I can no longer remember exactly his intonation when he read the psalm, and I can no longer picture the precise expression on his face when he sang barchi nafshi -- as I could nine years ago -- but my recollection of that recollection is still vivid.

Psalm 148 starts out with "hallelu et hashem min ha'sha'mayim" -- praise comes to God from the heavens -- and relates how the heavenly hosts praise God. It continues with "hallelu et hashem min ha'aretz" -- praise comes to God from the earth -- and relates how all creatures praise God ... each by doing what God intended it to do -- "ru'ach se'arah osoh d'varo" -- such as the stormy wind, fulfilling God's will.

But that's not enough, says the psalmist -- "hodo al eretz ve'shamayim" -- God's praise is beyond what earth and heaven can offer. For in doing God's will, all these creations act without choice -- the bird sings, the wind blows, the sun follows its course, the barren trees turn lush and then colorful -- that is what they were created to do.

How do we praise God? Each of our actions can be a song of praise if we act in accordance with God's will, if we choose to do God's will. Here is a segment of the meditation.

"You created me in your image. When my thoughts, speech, and actions reflect the divine image, I sing a song of praise to you -- halleluyah.

"You gave me the ability to feel and care. When my thoughts and actions are dedicated to helping others, I sing you my song of praise -- halleluyah.

"You have taught me to live according to your Torah. When I fulfill your commandments, I sing a song of praise to you -- halleluyah.

"You created me a unique person. When I fulfill that uniqueness, I offer you a song of praise -- halleluyah.

"You breathe into me at each moment the breath of life, and when I return it to you with thanks and praise, I sing to you my song -- halleluyah."

Those are my words. But they are also words that I learned from Hershel. Each of his actions was a song of praise, for each of his actions was done in accordance with God's will. Hershel believed that our faith could be seen in our actions. In an article entitled "What Does it Mean to Believe in God?" -- written in memory of Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose 25th yahrzeit will be observed soon -- Hershel presents an analysis of belief in God, an analysis of his belief in God, and then writes "To believe means to act out one's affirmations, to testify to one's belief through the way one acts; the test of one's faith is the degree to which it is embodied in the actual life one lives and the deeds one does. In Martin Buber's phrase, based on the Hebrew word "emunah", faith is faithfulness." That is to say, our belief in God is recognized in our faithfulness in carrying out God's work, in singing our song of praise to God.

Hershel Matt praised God with all his being. He knew his song of praise. Hershel also knew that every other person had to find his or her own song of praise, and he was ready to help them in their search. Many of us found our song of praise with

Hershel's assistance. How do we find our song of praise? It helps to have a guide, a model.

Hershel Matt was an "inclusionist" in a world of "exclusionists". He was convinced that each person was created in the image of God, and treated each person as if that spark of the divine was manifest. In his world, and before his God, there was room for Christians and Moslems, there was reaching out to non-believers and enemies, there was a way for every Jew to live Jewishly and uniquely, there was the possibility of equal congregational roles for men and women, and homosexuals were embraced as brothers and sisters, not rejected as sinners. He honored everyone's path to God. He affirmed that all people were created in the image of God, and embodied that faith in his life and his deeds. Although outwardly very meek, he took courageous stands on many issues -- in the articles he wrote, and in the people and organizations he supported.

I'd like to conclude by reading a few excerpts from the eulogy that I offered ten years ago:

In every area of human endeavor, there are some people who seem to have a natural talent -- a special gift. Many try to acquire each particular skill. Some master that skill. But despite their efforts they are outshone by the very few who have a gift -- who exhibit that skill naturally and effortlessly. We are all familiar with examples in art, in literature, in athletics, and even in all of our more ordinary pursuits.

And so it is also in the moral realm. Many of us try to act ethically, and sometimes we succeed. But what we are supposed to strive toward as an ideal, Hershel Matt seemed to do so naturally. He had a gift for goodness.

He somehow embodied each of the ethical teachings of our tradition. One example. Many of us try to avoid "lashon ha'ra" -- destructive speech -- and through effort we learn to catch ourselves just before, or sometimes just after we have begun to say what we shouldn't. But Hershel seemed to avoid "lashon ha'ra" naturally -- he could not speak ill of people because he recognized the humanity -- and the divinity -- of each person.

For Hershel this was not a philosophical or theological abstraction, but a truth to live by. Every stranger he would welcome, every person's name he would learn, every congregant's "succah" he would visit. Each person before God was his equal, and so he spoke to each person without pretentiousness, without arrogance, without condescension. He would never flaunt his learning or his piety, and so some of us

were not aware of his many achievements, as a scholar, as a teacher, as a human being. At the Highland Park Minyan, Hershel wanted to be treated like any other member, wanted no special status accorded him because of his learning, piety, or wisdom. Here he was Hershel, not Rabbi Matt, and he was not above taking on the day-to-day tasks necessary to keep an organization going.

Hershel was a person that many of us, and many others, called to talk with, about personal concerns or about religious concerns, or often both together. He listened sympathetically, took our ideas seriously, and always offered his help. To me personally, and to many others, he was always a source of encouragement and support, of friendship and strength. And he brought us all closer to God.

Whenever I read this verse from Micah, I always thought of Hershel: "You have been told what is good and what the Lord requires of you: "a'sot mishpat" -- to act justly, "a'havat chesed" -- to love kindness, "hatz'nay'ah lechet im elohecha" -- and to walk humbly with your God."

Hershel always acted justly, always loved kindness, and, most strikingly, always walked humbly with God. This verse is appropriately inscribed on Hershel's tombstone.

There are not many role models for doing what God requires of us. Many of us were privileged to know one -- Hershel Matt -- and to learn from his example.

To those of us who knew him and learned from him, his life brought us many, many blessings. And his memory will continue to be a source of many, many blessings. Zecher tzaddik liv'racha.

(This presentation was given at a study session commemorating the tenth yearzeit of Rabbi Hershel Yonah Matt at the Highland Park Conservative Temple and Center on January 4, 1998. Featured at the session was a presentation by Dr. Daniel Matt on "God and the Big Bang", the subject of his recent book.)