

The Mixed Feelings We Might Have About Praise

Ken Wilson 3.7.2021

For Lent we're reflecting on a single word, mostly feeling words in connection with God. Emily's word was wonder. Next week, Caroline may do "imagine" and after that Susan on loneliness. My word is praise. I picked it because over my lifetime I've noticed conflicting feelings about praise, and I thought some of you could relate. My mixed feelings preceded any religious ideas about praise like we see in the Psalms.

I grew up before self-esteem parenting culture. If I was complimented about something, my parents said, "**Don't let it go to your head.**" Their generation was worried about over-praising not under-praising. Like a normal human being I like compliments, but I feel awkward receiving them. My late wife noticed this. So when I deflected a compliment from someone, Nancy would chime in, "**Receive the compliment Ken!**" Maybe parents in my generation were determined not to under-compliment their kids. I just remember when my kids were young, at soccer or ball games, parents would praise every little thing. After striking out you might hear, "Wow! You almost hit it that time. Good job!" Psychologists call it indiscriminate praise; research shows kids quickly learn to tune it out.

Maybe it's not a surprise I developed conflicted feelings about praise as a spiritual practice.

My first memory about praise in a religious sense is from my Episcopal Confirmation Class—age 10? Old School: Q: *What is Your Name?* A: *Kenneth John Wilson* Q: *Who gave you this name?* A: *My sponsors at Baptism* Q: *What did your sponsors then promise for you?* A: *They did promise and vow these things: First that I should renounce the devil and all his works and pomps and vanity of this wicked world, and all the sinful lusts of the flesh [Sugar Pops] second that I should believe all the articles of the Christian faith [a lot to lay on a 10-year-old] Q Dost thou not think that thou art bound to believe, and to do as they have promised for you?* A: *Yes, verily*

Why didn't I just say, "Wait I'm only 10—I need to learn what verily means!" During the class I was told the purpose of man is to praise God. I applied what I learned about the dangers of letting compliments go to your head and thought: *Wait! God wants to be praised? By everyone, frequently? What is he, some kind of egomaniac?* I didn't have a

Diane Sonda or a Susan Shaffer or Caroline Kittle to explore these ideas with. The Episcopal church has changed a lot since then. But shortly after I was confirmed, I began to describe myself as an atheist. I didn't like this idea of a God who was like "Praise me!" all the time.

As a young adult I was drawn into the Jesus movement, the charismatic wing, which was big into expressed vocal praise. I could tell you stories, like when my father-in-law came to a "prayer meeting" and two young guys behind us were yelling their praises in gift of tongues and my father-in-law, leaned over to me and said, "Are they OK? Should we call someone?" But there were plenty of times when this praise, especially earlier quieter versions with singing was just so compelling and hauntingly beautiful. I felt like a bee in a beehive that feels one with the vibrating hive without needing to meditate for 2 hours. I had similar push-pull experiences with "Contemporary Worship Music"—sometimes feeling the woo-woos, and other times turned off by celebrity-vibe around the whole enterprise, or lyrics like "My God is better than Your God" or frequent mentions of blood. Sometimes I felt transported, other times manipulated. I wonder if it isn't possible that lots of people have a different set of mixed feelings about the spiritual practice of praise. Since we rarely sing in front of others, except in churches, I wonder if people often feel super self-conscious about their voice. With this mixed feeling background, I want to muse on this idea of praise as a spiritual practice.

Begin with Hebrew word: Hallelujah. Hallel means praise (but with connotations to be explored in a minute) and Jah is a short form of the unnamable name [I AM WHO AM; or more likely I WILL BECOME WHO I BECOME] Hallelujah = **praise God**.

Most occurrences of Hallelujah are found in Psalms which are songs. Now we only have the words without the melodies. But melodies change the feeling of words quite a bit. Two most famous melodies associated with word Hallelujah: 1. Hallelujah from Handel's Messiah. Emotion it conveys would be triumph—like a march. 2. Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah. Handel was German, Cohen, Jewish. An observant Jewish person informed by Buddhist meditative practice, so a spiritual guy. [Listen]

Melody matters to the feeling. I was with my mother when she died, after a long illness. It didn't feel horrifying, it felt sad and tender and sacred—like Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah.

Similar sense from these verses from Psalm 149 (keeping in mind we don't have the melody)

Hallelujah

For it is good to hymn God,

For it is sweet to adorn with praise.

Healer of the broken-hearted,

God binds their painful wounds

God counts the number of stars,

To all of them gives names.

Hallelujah

The stem "Hallel" in Hallelujah has certain connotations in Hebrew. A Hebrew dictionary says this: The verb הלל (*halal*) means to shine (what excited stars do) or praise and cheer (what excited souls do). It may even denote too much of a good thing: to be raving mad. Yahoo! Would be an equivalent in English.

So Hallelujah is something we can do when we catch a glimpse or whiff of goodness in the world, kindness, sacredness, and we just vibrate like shining stars vibrate in excitement. When I first heard the Pfizer vaccine had been developed way ahead of schedule and tested out as 95% effective I almost started crying—by that time two of my favorite men in Julia's church had died from Covid, losses & injustices were mounting, and Leonard Cohen version and the root meaning of Hallel (what excited stars do) were perfect combination—an end is in sight, wow!

There's an intriguing connotation that Jesus might have had with this word. One interesting thing about the construction Hallelujah in Hebrew is that it adopts the same form as a Proper Name. And there was a key figure in religious life of Israel at the time [he died a few years after Jesus was born] named Hillel. Praise. We associate words with people. During time of Jesus two sages founded two different interpretive traditions, most prominent ones: **Shammai & Hillel**. Shammai was strict, focused on purity; by

contrast, Hillel was generous-hearted, liberal making more accommodation to our human limitations. Jesus seems to have been most influenced by Hillel (who died when Jesus was a boy.) Story of Hillel being asked by a cheeky student to teach the entire law standing on one leg. Hillel stood on one leg and said, "That which is hateful unto you do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole of the Torah, the rest is commentary. Go forth and study." Jesus flipped that into the positive: **do unto others as you would have them do unto you—this the Law and the Prophets** to summarize the Sermon on Mount, his interpretation of Torah. I wonder sat for the Sermon on the Mount (traditional rabbinic thing to do, then at end he stood up on one leg and gave his version of the Hillel golden rule?

So there's every reason to think Hillel was a beloved sage to Jesus and when Jesus said Hallelujah, he was reminded of the rabbi named praise. We do associate words with people.

There's a different feel when the person saying Hallelujah is a white guy manipulating a crowd, strutting his patriarchal power his Jah [short form of God's name] might be an entirely different Jah than let's say, Amanda Gorman, the young poet [who was followed by a private security guard as she's walking home because he thought she looked "suspicious"]. Amanda Gorman uses biblical images in her poetry, and the word Hallelujah in one of her poems would have an entirely different feel—her Jah would be a different Jah than the guy behind the Plexiglas pulpit. So who is saying the word Hallelujah and their vision of Jah make a difference.

Another Hebrew word for praise is **Yahdah** (pronounced Yaw-daw). Funny thing about this word it is often translated praise or thanks even though literal meaning is "**extend a hand**" or "**throw**" Hebrew is a more embodied-physical-concrete language than English. It's possible that the Jewish way of expressing thanks-praise was with an extended hand. Like in lots of cultures words are often accompanied with a lot of hand waving. So the physical gesture of throwing your hands up came to mean praise. In sign language isn't this applause?

So let me offer a little playful **midrash** on praise. Midrash is where you string words from Torah together, from different places, to draw out new meanings or applications.

It's called stringing pearls, like you might make a necklace with different color beads. So start with **Yahdah** meaning "throw your hands up" in praise. Then add a pearl from a rabbi in Philippians saying (I'm using the David Bentley Hart translation which hews close to the original language: **"Whatever things are grand, whatever right, whatever pure, whatever lovely, whatever of good repute—if there be any virtue and be any praise—ponder these things."** String those two pearls with a third, a saying of Jesus: **"Out of the fulness of the heart, the mouth speaks"**

There was this management technique going around maybe 10 years ago. When you need to correct an employee, start with a praise, then give the correction, then end with the praise. People tried this with their spouses, kids, partners. So you make a correction sandwich, with two slices of praise, one before, one after. Of course, employees or spouses or kids on the butt of end this technique soon came to realize that when the person opens with "you now I really appreciate you ..." they knew the criticism was coming. They realize—this person has been stewing on something that annoys them about me and they read about this technique and they had to come up with two white bread slices of praise to get me to swallow their criticism.

What if we strung together 3 pearls instead? The first Yahdah—a praise we extend or throw out like a gesturing person talking with their hands. Then we add "whatever is praiseworthy, ponder these things." Ponder as in dwell on them, meditate on them, let them linger in your heart." And then "Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks."

What if we let this guide our practice of praising or thanking others?

I wonder: Wouldn't it be natural for those who nurtured the spiritual practice of praising God to have a certain ease in praising or encouraging others? Is that part of the divine purpose in praise as a spiritual practice? To notice the best in others and comment on it? If we were, as a spiritual practice, praising Jah, wouldn't we also be looking for Jah wherever Jah could be found, especially in visible form, in those who bear Jah's image? That's not such a stretch.

And rather than praising to manipulate people as though we're training a dog, and rather than praising people because we really want to correct them and we have to put a couple of praise slices of bread around the correction, so they swallow our criticism, we nurture the spiritual practice of noticing and pondering the good in others, especially around us, so that our hearts are filled with these things when we think of them, and then out of our heart, from time to time the mouth would inevitably speak? From time to time we would throw out a message from our hearts, into a text message or a chat on Zoom, or SnapChat [a gratuitous cultural reference on my part]

So they say we're maybe 2/3 of the way through this pandemic. And this is the hardest part of any period of isolation, the 2/3 mark. Our mental health is stretching thin. Maybe in a time like this, when our tanks are a little low, Jah might even be pleased if we deflected some of the praise meant for Jah, to the others around us who bear Jah's image for a while. Then when we come together and can sign our lungs out again, we can make it up to Jah. Is what I'm thinking.