



December 2007

## Speaking “You” Theologically: A Response to Daniel Haskell Weiss’ “The (Odd) Deixis of ‘You’ in Rabbinic Prayer”

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### Recommended Citation

Rashkover, Randi. "Speaking “You” Theologically: A Response to Daniel Haskell Weiss’ “The (Odd) Deixis of ‘You’ in Rabbinic Prayer”." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 5, no. 1 (2007): 89-94. <https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-r2n3-bt11>.

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# **SPEAKING 'YOU' THEOLOGICALLY: A RESPONSE TO DANIEL HASKELL WEISS' "THE (ODD) DEIXIS OF 'YOU' IN RABBINIC PRAYER."**

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Daniel Haskell Weiss' essay "The (Odd) Deixis of 'You' in Rabbinic Prayer" is a very suggestive piece that illuminates how pragmatics, applied to analyses of Jewish liturgy and liturgical performance, illuminates implicit and explicit theological dimensions to Jewish congregational expression. Identifying a unique use of the deictic, Weiss presents a theology of a relational 'you' as it is syntactically built-into the language of rabbinic prayer. In what follows, I would like to further Weiss' insightful account of the 'you', first by raising a few questions and then by adding on to the rich material he offers.

In his essay, Weiss explains that a deictic utterance is one whose meaning relies on context. Rabbinic prayer makes use of the deictic but, according to Weiss, offers a twist on its pragmatic function when applied to the 'you' of prayer. The 'you' of rabbinic prayer counts as a sort of suspended deictic – an utterance whose meaning ought to require context but whose context is never provided. Weiss suggests that this unique

characteristic of rabbinic prayer points to a theology of the wholly other one whom we address. That there is no context for the 'you' functions, he argues, as a syntactical aid in expressing a transcendent other whose reality exceeds and defies propositional expression and/or naming. Not only do we only have 'you', Weiss says, we also only need 'you', since this suspended deictic offers a syntactic guard against idolatry in liturgical language.

The true 'you' – alone contains no other features, and so the speaking of this 'you' is sheer address, an address to the absolutely other from oneself. If additional concepts are present, these concepts belong to the speaker himself and are not fully other. (13)

In effect Weiss is presenting two claims here: 1. The 'you' whom we address is the 'wholly other' and 2. The 'you' whom we address is '*wholly other*'. Clearly Weiss is trying to show us how rabbinic prayer helps those praying address the God beyond God. But the claim that we address a 'you' who is 'wholly other' is troubling.

If the 'you' is 'wholly other' then it must be radically different from us. If, however, it is radically different from us then it cannot be available to us as an object/subject of address. This point is made by Karl Barth in his famous recantation of his own theology of the 'wholly other' in *The Humanity of God*. Here Barth asks, doesn't the 'wholly other' who so radically differs from humankind show "greater similarity to the deity of the God of the philosophers than to the deity of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What if the result of the new hymn to the majesty of God should be a new confirmation of the hopelessness of all human activity? What if it should issue in a new justification of the autonomy of man and thus of secularism"<sup>1</sup> A 'wholly other' deity is so removed from anything human that it becomes impossible to speak of this deity in any meaningful way, including the reference to it as the 'you' whom we address in prayer. If by contrast we address a 'you', we must be able to say something about the 'you' whom we address. If we cannot speak 'about' this 'you', then we cannot lend meaning to this 'you' and if we cannot lend meaning to this

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 45.

'you' then we cannot relate to it either. To address the 'you' presupposes that the 'you' means something and if it means something, we ought to be able to articulate that meaning in some sort of claim. The "mere you" is not enough.

But here, Weiss' analysis comes into play again. Weiss wants (like Barth) to remind us how easy it is to forget that the God to whom we pray is different from any other content about which we speak. We pose this point then as a question: If, given the above requirement for 'meaning' – how might we speak meaningfully about God without incorrectly assuming that what is meaningful for us is necessarily 'true' about God?

One route might be to get some help from an old argument posed by William James in his classic essay "The Will to Believe." Drawing from James' argument, we might say that the 'you' about whom I speak in order that I may address 'you' meaningfully is nothing other than a good hypothesis that may or may not be 'true'. In this essay, James suggests that since there is insufficient evidence to establish securely the 'truth' about God and since believing 'in' God is momentous (of great import), forced (suspended judgment is not a possibility) and live (it's really an option)<sup>2</sup>, then, James says, I not only have the 'right' to believe but must admit what he refers to as the "religious hypothesis."<sup>3</sup> "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds"<sup>4</sup> In this case, I have the right to speak about God as meaningful, and therefore, to address God as a 'you' without however assuming that the God whom I speak of and meaningfully address is in fact 'true'. The verdict is out on this and so meaning cannot necessarily equal truth in this instance. The most I can say is that the God about whom and to whom I speak is possibly true. Still, my language is meaningful and I can speak

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<sup>2</sup> For James' own explanation of the elements of a 'genuine option,' see William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> James, *The Will to Believe*, 26.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 11.

and pray and hope that what is meaningful is also true. If, in fact, it turns out that the God about whom and to whom I speak is true, then I'll have been on the right team all along and will have gained a lot by acting even when I wasn't sure.

However, there are a number of problems with this attempt to disengage slightly meaning from truth when it comes to needing to speak about the God we believe in and pray to. Most notably here is that the language of a religious hypothesis does not get us to Weiss' 'you'. Weiss wants to show how the God we pray to is not only transcendent to our efforts at meaning, but transcendent of our world of things – that is, transcendent to that which we normally put into propositional language. But this is not the case with respect to the religious hypothesis. Here the slippage between truth and meaning is not a result of the difference between our meaning and a transcendent truth but rather the result of a theoretically surmountable epistemological barrier between ourselves and our ability to justify through evidence the security of our belief. In other words, the ground of the religious hypothesis, or that which offers believers the justification to hold as meaningful that which is not necessarily true, is the possibility of the thing as true in our world—the possibility of sufficient evidence. But, if what we hope for is something for which there is sufficient evidence, then that which we hope for and about which we speak hypothetically is an 'It,' not a transcendent 'You'.

If then we still hope to explain how we can speak about God without reducing God to a finite object, we will have to try another route than that of the language of religious hypothesis. Weiss already offers us the solution in his essay when he says that there already are "predicates implied by [the] mere 'you'." (15). The notion that the 'mere you' implies its own predicates is, it seems to me, the key to resolving our problem. Where Weiss and I disagree, I think, has to do with the value of linking these implicit predicates to our uttering the 'you'. That the 'you' implies certain predicates, Weiss holds, does not also mean that these predicates are important to identify in our prayer: "The use of 'you' in prayer is sufficient in itself and does not require any further specification; as such, it can be characterized as 'you' – alone, or mere-'you'." (12) Weiss argues

that 'you' alone is sufficient because the "saying of 'you' contains everything that needs to be said." (14) But how do we know this? What would distinguish the saying of a semantically rich 'you' and a semantically empty 'you' except the linkage between one of the sayings and its predicates? This, however, stands in contrast to Weiss' explanation for theological predicates when he says that 'although nothing more needs to be said beyond 'you,' the predicate/[s] *can be helpful* [emphasis, mine] for directing the speaker's attention and awareness to a particular feature of the relation" (14) If, however, we appreciate that the 'you' alone is semantically empty, the role of these emerging predicates increases and becomes necessary in our praying. What sorts of predicates do I mean?

The 'you' addressed in prayer is not semantically empty but linked to certain predicates that are inextricable from our prayer. When persons praying say 'you' they are speaking not only 'to' but 'about' a particular 'you'. But the predicates we assign to the 'you' arise neither from our box of wishes nor from our scientific expectation of what the 'you' actually 'is'. Rather, they are the predicates of a 'you' that we address. There are certain minimal claims about 'you' that I make when I address 'you' in prayer; for example:

1. You are that which 'called me'. My address to you is a response to you.
2. You therefore are one who invited me. But to invite me into a conversation or initiate a conversation is to give – it is to extend a gift.
3. But to extend a gift is to move out of yourself towards me. Therefore, you are one who exteriorized yourself and called to me where I am. 'You', in other words, came to me in my context of meaning, in my history, in my time.

These claims are implicit in my saying 'you'. They are not claims that implicate the 'you' into a thing in my world but refer to the exteriority of the one whom I address. Without them, I would not have said 'you,' or, more specifically, I would not address 'you'. They function as adverbial predicates of the way/s that 'you' revealed yourself to me such that I address you as I do. They must, however, be more than implicit. They are

not dispensable if prayer is to be anything more than an exercise in addressing an empty placeholder.

Now of course the biblical narrative offers many examples of this 'you-speaking' and one could develop a theology – that is, a narrated account of the 'you' addressed. Persons who address God as, for example, the one who “bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exodus 19:5) or “the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2) offer these detailed accounts as narrations of how God happened to them in their history. When they pray to the 'you', they pray to the 'you' who happened to them this way. The theology of the prayer to the 'you' is a theology of the God who happens to us and therefore of a God whom we wait for. We can speak and pray not only to this God but about this God as he/she/it related to us – took time with us and came into time for us *and* we can speak about this God as we wait for he/she/it to take time with us again and take more time for us. In this way, a theology of prayer permits us to pray to and therefore talk about the God who enters our history and whose actions affect those who address him/her.