The Ruach and the Rabbis

At the beginning of 2015 we were invited to a historic symposium held in a Jewish Community Center in the Fort Lauderdale area. Why was it historic? Because for the first time ever, traditional rabbis (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox) and pastors of various denominations met to dialogue on a common topic: Prayer and the Holy Spirit! To our knowledge, a meeting of this type, of these two faith communities, with over 200 attending, has generally been considered an impossibility, due to long-standing walls of suspicion, prejudice, distrust, and misunderstanding built up over 2000 years.

But God! He constantly amazes us! The topic of prayer was not so unusual, but a dialogue on the Holy Spirit (Ruach HaKodesh) is another story. Although the Holy Spirit is seen right from the beginning of the Torah in the Book of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters," the Holy Spirit is very seldom mentioned in today's Judaism. When we went to research the topic in our traditional Jewish books, we looked for the words "Holy Spirit," "Ruach," "Ruach HaKodesh," and "Shekinah" in the indexes. Not one of these words appeared in the indexes of the following books: To Be of Jew, To Pray as a Jew, The Book of Jewish Knowledge, The Guide to Jewish Knowledge, and Jewish Literacy, among others.

This told us that the Holy Spirit, as a distinct entity, does not play a major role in Jewish theology and practice. And yet—the rabbis were interested in participating in a theological think tank on the topic. One Orthodox Jew is actually getting his Masters Degree at Oral Roberts University in Jewish/Christian relations, with his thesis on "The Holy Spirit in the Tanach."

The opinion was expressed that in these end-times, the Holy Spirit will be a rallying point of commonality to draw Jews and Christians together! The need for this drawing together is strongly felt since both Jews and Christians, two covenant communities, are facing a common enemy today: radical Islam. We felt as if we were seeing the beginning of Joel 2:29, "And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days."

The Chief Rabbi of a city in Israel expressed his regret that the Jewish people have lost the art of spontaneous prayer. "Would that human beings would pray all day!," he said, quoting the Talmud. "If God wants us to pray all day, then it can't just be prayers from the Prayer Book (Siddur). There must also be spontaneous prayer." The Rabbi said some beautiful things. For example, "Love cannot exist in a vacuum. Love needs someone to love. God believes in us—that we will be His partners." The Rabbi expressed the view that the Ruach HaKodesh, the Divine Spirit, is the part of God that is in every human being, based on Genesis 2:7, "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (Neshama chaim - the soul of life)." He went on to say that we can only get in touch with (the God within) through action. "Action is the best prayer." The ultimate goal of this action is "tikkun olam," the repairing of the world. "We have to bring the Messiah," he said. And in Jewish tradition, the Messiah is supposed to come on Saturday night.
Hester Panim

The brilliant young man who is studying Jewish/Christian relations spoke about "divine concealment," known in Hebrew as "HES-ter pa-NEEM," hiding of the face. God says in Deuteronomy 31:18, "And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they have done, in that they have turned to other gods." The idea of God hiding is mentioned 26 times in the Tanakh (Old Testament). In this scholar's opinion, the Holy Spirit only operates in "hiddenness," and He wants us to come to Him in "concealment." He mentioned the Book of Esther (read on Purim this month) as the ultimate of divine concealment, and stated that the Book of Esther was written in the Holy Spirit. (We have heard the same idea expressed concerning the Song of Songs.) The name of God is not mentioned in either of these two books.

His final point: "We live in the Messianic Era. Therefore, the Ruach is becoming more visible." WOW! In other words, the Holy Spirit is coming out of hiding. Quite a concept!

Holy Spirit Defined

The Blackwell Dictionary of Judaica defines the Holy Spirit as follows: "Hebrew: Ruach HaKodesh. In the Bible the Hebrew term means literally 'divine spirit.' In rabbinic literature, it refers to 'divine inspiration'; the criterion for determining the biblical canon was whether each book had been inspired by the Holy Spirit. According to rabbinic sources, the communication to an individual of the Holy Spirit takes place only after long religious discipline resulting in spiritual ascent." For this reason, the Holy Spirit is not often mentioned in connection with prayer—especially with the prayers of individuals.

There is a concept which was mentioned at the symposium that is well-known in most branches of Judaism. It is called "kavanah" (kah-vah-NAH). This Hebrew word refers to the inner devotion with which a person prays or observes a commandment. One must be acutely aware that it is God who is being addressed in Jewish prayer, to "know before Whom you are standing"—having a sense of standing in the presence of God. The one who prays must direct his heart to heaven with a reverent frame of mind, and not merely read mechanically from the prayer book. Kavanah is akin to the Christian concept of "praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 1: 20; Ephesians 6:18).

The Ruach in the Tanakh

The Hebrew word Ruach is used 389 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is used to designate the human spirit, God's Holy Spirit, and several other entities such as "breath," "wind," "odor," and "space." The exact words, Holy Spirit, occur only three times in the Tanach, in Psalms 51:11 and Isaiah 63:10-11: "Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." (King David prayed this when confronted with his sin by Nathan the prophet.) "But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; so He turned Himself against them as an enemy, and He fought against them. Then he remembered the days of old, Moses and his people, saying: 'Where is He who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherd of His flock? Where is He who put His Holy Spirit within them...'' This latter verse has often been cited as evidence that the Holy Spirit in the Tanach is a Person, not just a Divine Force or Presence. The Hebrew word for "grieved" in verse 10 means to feel profound hurt, pain, and grief. Only a Person can be grieved.

The more usual expression for Holy Spirit in the Tanach is "Spirit of God (Ruach Elohim)" or "Spirit of the LORD (Ruach Adonai)." Most scholars see a progressive revelation in understanding the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, from being synonymous with God (His Spirit), to being distinct from God the Father. Jewish understanding, of course, does not include the belief in the Spirit as One in a complex unity. Tanach primarily focuses on the deeds of the Spirit in relation to mankind, using non-personal words and phrases to describe the Spirit such as wind, fire, and light. For example, "And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-12).
Empowered by the Ruach

The activity of the Spirit of God in the Tanach is very evident in the way the Spirit came upon the leaders of Israel to empower them to accomplish various God-given tasks. The Spirit provided the gifts necessary for leadership for kings and rulers, and gave mental and physical guidance.

Consider the judges of Israel:

Othniel: "The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand..." Judges 3:10

Gideon: "But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him." Judges 6:34

Let's look at some kings:

Saul: "Then the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man." 1 Samuel 10:6

David: "Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward." 1 Samuel 16:13

Some other godly leaders of Israel:

Joseph: "And Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?'" Genesis 41:38

Daniel: "Belteshazzar (Daniel's Babylonian name), chief of the magicians, because I know that the Spirit of the Holy God is in you, and no secret troubles you, explain to me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and its interpretation." Daniel 4:9

In some cases the Spirit of God "came upon" Israel's leaders, for a certain purpose and time. The Spirit could also be removed, as was the case with King Saul, "But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the LORD troubled him." (1 Samuel 16:14)

In the cases of Joseph and Daniel (and David), the Spirit actually "dwelt in them." It has been suggested by Ryrie that... "Although the Spirit did indwell men in Old Testament times, it was a selective ministry, both in regard to whom He indwelt and for how long."

The Ruach and the Nation of Israel

The Spirit's work in the midst of the nation of Israel was unique. We read about this movement of God's Ruach throughout the Prophets. For example, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you..." (Ezekiel 36:26-27). This is a message concerning the future of a restored Israel, a nation turning back to God. Ezekiel himself experienced the power of the Ruach in amazing ways: "... The Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard Him speaking to me" (Ezekiel 2:2 NIV). The Spirit of God communicated the Word of God to the nation of Israel through the prophetic word. David, although general and King, also had the gift of prophecy. He is quoted in 2 Samuel 23:2 as saying, "The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue." The Prophet Isaiah said to His People Israel, "Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit have sent Me" (Isaiah 48:16). (This certainly sounds like a personal Holy Spirit!)

The prophet Micah said, "But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the Lord, and of justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8). Zechariah, prophesying in the Ruach, and referring to the reason for the Babylonian exile said, "Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 7:12).
Messiah and the Ruach

The prophet Isaiah described the coming Messiah/King on whom God's Spirit would rest in chapter 11:1-2, "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD."

Yeshua is that Messiah. The coming of the prophesied Spirit is proclaimed in each of the four Gospels. From Matthew's Gospel: "When He had been baptized, Yeshua came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him" (Matthew 3:16). The Apostle John bore witness, saying, "... I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'" (John 1:32-33).

The Ruach and the New Covenant

The Holy Spirit in the Brit Hadasha is more than an empowering presence or power that comes upon select individuals. He is a Person who indwells every believer. This is the miracle of the new birth, as explained by Yeshua to a Jewish rabbi named Nicodemus in John 3:1-10. Once a person is truly born again, the Spirit never leaves, although He can be grieved and quenched through ungodly attitudes and actions. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice." (Ephesians 4:30-31)

The Spirit that Yeshua promised His talmidim was first given to them on Shavuot (Pentecost). "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you." (John 14:16-17). "... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:4)

Ruach HaKodesh in the Brit Hadasha is a Helper, Teacher, Guide, Comforter, Counselor, Advocate, Revealer of the Messiah, and of things to come. He is omnipresent, but also indwells individual believers, and is actively involved in teaching believers in Messiah how to pray. The Tree of Life Version says it well, "... The Ruach helps in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we should but the Ruach Himself intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. And He who searches the heart knows the mind of the Ruach, because He intercedes for the Kedoshim according to the will of God." (Romans 8:26-27).

That is life in the Spirit!— A Holy Spirit who prays, has intelligence (1 Corinthians 2:11) gives gifts to men (1 Corinthians 12:4-11), convicts the world of sin (John 16:8), and calls people to certain ministries (Acts 13:2).

The spontaneous prayers of believers, that the rabbis at the symposium admired, are a direct result of the Holy Spirit dwelling on the inside of every born again child of God. The rabbis may be closer than we think—A "hidden Ruach" is at work, revealing the one true Messiah of Israel! He is waiting for these beloved rabbis! "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'" (Revelation 22:17).

Love in the Ruach,

P.S. Passover is early this year: April 3 (eve). Time to order your Jewish Jewels Passover Haggadahs. Order one for each guest at your seder. BONUS: We will include in your Haggadah order one Passover Haggadah Guide to help you prepare. Visit our website for all other Passover needs. www.JewishJewels.org