SEVEN GATES into Temple Emanuel

B'shem Omro

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In the ancient rabbinic code of honor, one must always, whenever offering an idea that is not your own, give over the teaching "*b'shem omro*," "in the name of the one who originally said it." Only one problem: What if the "*omro*" – the one who is widely acknowledged as the source of the teaching – is not actually the original source?

I stumbled into just this issue a few months ago when reading through Abraham Joshua Heschel's book, "God in Search of Man."

First, some context: If you came to Temple Emanuel last year, you would have found, in a little pamphlet right next to your Siddur Sim Shalom and Etz Hayim Chumash, the inspirational sentiment: "When I pray I speak to God; when I study, God speaks to me." The attribution? Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, *zichrono l'vracha*, a prolific scholar and the deeply respected Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary for three decades from 1940 to 1972. In fact, if you were to survey Jewish sources today, you would find this idea often quoted, attributed to Rabbi Finkelstein.

The problem is, right there on the pages of Heschel's book, in black and white, were nearly the exact same words, attributed not to Rabbi Finkelstein, but to the *Yossipon* – a Jewish historical text dated by scholars to have been written anywhere between the eighth and eleventh centuries.

The matter might have ended there. But a few weeks ago at our Shabbat Alive service, I mentioned the quote and the fact that it had been misattributed. A member of our congregation asked me after services for the location of the quote. No problem, I said, and went to my bookshelf to pull out my old copy of "God in Search of Man." I thought I'd marked the place, but I couldn't find it even after some searching. Frustrated, I put the task in my "to-do" pile, and

there it remained until I saw our friend again. "Have you found the original attribution yet?" he asked.

I hadn't. So I turned to the internet. Someone else must have encountered this source discrepancy, I reasoned. But link after link quoted Finkelstein. Until at last, a different search term broke through – and what I found amazed me.

It turns out that Finkelstein was indeed not the first person to say this. Nor, for that matter, was the *Yossipon*. Here is what I found:

"When we pray, we speak to God; when we read the Word, it is God speaking to us" – Christian teaching.

"When we pray, we talk to God; when we meditate, we listen to God" – Hindu teaching.

Mormon version: "If you want to talk to God, pray; if you want God to talk to you, read the scriptures."

And, Muslim version: "If you want to talk to God, pray; if you want God to talk to you, read the Koran."

Following the trail as far back as it would go led to the earliest referenced source, in all places, on the Vatican's website: "We speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him speak when we read the Divine saying." So said St. Ambrose, a bishop who lived in the 4th century.

B'shem Omro – St. Ambrose? It sort of changes the feel of the whole thing.

My first instinct was to keep searching. After all, if all these traditions had this quote, we Jews must have said it first! But then I wondered: What would it mean to say that this quote, famously attributed to a twentieth century rabbi as authentic Jewish wisdom, actually has deep

roots in multiple faith traditions? Would it undermine our claim to it, or teach us something else?

The question nagged at me all week. And surprisingly, I found that, rather than undermining the power of this beautiful teaching, seeing it reflected in five diverse religious traditions actually strengthened it.

Have you ever heard that old Indian story of the blind men asked to describe an elephant? One of them, feeling only the leg, says, "An elephant is strong and solid, like a tree." Another, stationed at the trunk, disagrees: "What are you talking about? It is nimble and long, like a snake." The last, finding himself swatted by the tail, says, "You're both wrong. It's quick and light, like a bird."

That, much of the time, is what happens when our divergent religious traditions describe experiences of God. We each seem to get only a glimpse of the proverbial elephant and find ourselves divided as to what we saw. So, when we all see, and all come back with the same report, that is an insight that passes what I like to call "the elephant test" – a glimpse of truth with a capital "T."

Such a shared glimpse opens up, for a moment, a window beyond the deeply held divisions of our diverse belief systems to the utopian vision we pray for in the concluding lines of the *Aleinu* prayer – that one day, we will be one, and, through our shared understanding, <u>God</u> will be one.

But if we all share the insight – if it is universal truth that "When we pray we speak to God and when we learn God speaks to us" – what do we need Rabbi Finkelstein's version for? And why might it be that his "Jewish" version is the one that is now so widely quoted?

Because there's a balance to the prophetic vision of the conclusion of the *Aleinu*, and that is its opening, which tells us that while we aspire to oneness with each other, we also have a

unique contribution to make as Jews. "*Sh'lo asanu k'goyei ha'aratzot*" "For you did not make us like other nations," the *Aleinu* reads.

We are indeed blessed when we share the same overall idea and even use most of the same words, but in this case, as in many, there is one important addition, one *chiddush*, of the Finkelstein perspective – as the member of our congregation whose question began this search observed when I shared with him what I'd found.

The other texts all read some variant of, "When we read God's word, God speaks to us." Finkelstein says not, "when we read the word," but "when we study."

What is the difference? Aren't "reading" and "studying" synonyms? Not really. Reading is often a passive experience, a receiving experience. Studying is active. And that, I believe, is the uniquely Jewish take on this universal teaching – for us, as Jews, when we engage the living text actively, when we dig, push, debate, and come to understand, that is where we hear God speaking to us.

This ancient wisdom is quoted in the name of a twentieth century rabbi precisely because of the word "study" that he adds. "Study" says, there's always more to discover. "*Hafoch ba v'hafoch ba*" "Turn it and turn it" and a new insight will emerge. There is still, in every generation, some profound understanding to add.

In the beautiful words of Psalm 119, the likely inspiration from which all other sources for this quote came, "*Ki Edotecha Sicha Li*" "Your Statutes, God, are your conversation with me." We are part of the conversation, a conversation that goes on through the generations, through many traditions, throughout the world.

May we be blessed both through what we share, and what is unique, to listen as we learn and to find, in the journey through our sources, the voice of God.