

# ETTY HILLESUM: FOR GOD AND WITH GOD

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ETTY HILLESUM, A YOUNG JEWISH WOMAN who had been living in Amsterdam, died in Auschwitz on 30 November 1943 at the age of 29. She left behind a diary and 73 letters, and more letters are still being found.<sup>1</sup> Hillesum's writings articulate a remarkable experience of God during times when many just abandoned a faith that seemed so useless. Who could still talk about an almighty God in Auschwitz? Why would we need a God apparently so indifferent, or perhaps helpless?

Many theologians, especially Jewish theologians, have tried to find a new way of understanding God in response to the Shoah. But rather than trying to define God, Etty Hillesum sought to defend and even to help God. How did this happen? What was God to her, and could her God be of any use to us today? Could her writings help us too to live *for God and with God* in a world distorted by the excesses of hatred and violence? Can she help us come to terms with the sheer variety of spiritualities now presented to us?

Etty found God while keeping her distance from the tenets of any religion. Following a discussion about Christ and the Jews, she wrote:

Two philosophies, sharply defined, brilliantly presented, rounded off; defended with passion and vigour. But I can't help feeling that every hotly championed philosophy hides a little lie. That it must fall short of 'the truth'. And yet I myself will have to find a philosophy to live by, a fenced-in space of my own, violently seized and passionately defended. But then wouldn't that be giving life

<sup>1</sup> The diary is composed of eleven notebooks, the seventh of which is lost. Two additional letters were recently published by Denise de Costa in *Met pen en penseel. Levenskunst van Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum en Charlotte Salomon* (Thieme Deventer: Deventer, 2003).

short change? The alternative may well be floundering in uncertainty and chaos. (30 November 1941)<sup>2</sup>

Etty's understanding of God was based on an original combination of influences from psychology, literature, philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, and other sources. But above all it drew on her distinctive way of understanding and interpreting: 'You must learn to trust your own experiences, observations and intuitions', she wrote, 'rather than believe that you have to get everything out of books' (5 October 1941).

Etty felt that she had a task to accomplish, and that she was the heiress of a large spiritual legacy—a legacy that she was to share as best she could (18 September 1942). That intuition had something prophetic in it. For her writings are becoming the voice of a theology after Auschwitz, speaking to Jews, to Christians and indeed to anyone, whatever their level of religious commitment:

... all the divisions between people and nations are being removed for me. There are moments when I can see right through life and the human heart, when I understand more and more and become calmer and calmer, and am filled with a faith in God that has grown so quickly inside me that it frightened me at first but has now become inseparable from me. (7 July 1942)

### **Etty and God**

Etty was born in 1914 in Zeeland. She was the daughter of Rebecca Bernstein and Louis Hillesum, and she had two brothers, Jaap and Mischa. Although they remained part of the Jewish community, the Hillesums did not practise their religion. Since 1937, Etty had been living in Amsterdam with a retired accountant and widower, Han Wegerif, who became her lover. In May 1940, Holland was invaded by the Nazis, who started to strip the Jewish population of their rights and properties. In July 1941, Etty's brother Jaap persuaded her to accept a position at the Jewish Council in Amsterdam, hoping to protect his sister. But Etty only

<sup>2</sup> All references to Hillesum's diary and letters are taken from *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943*, edited by Klaas A. D. Smelik, translated by Arnold J. Pomerans (Ottawa: Novalis, 2002). Since a number of other, less complete editions exist, references to the diary are by date of entry, not by page number.

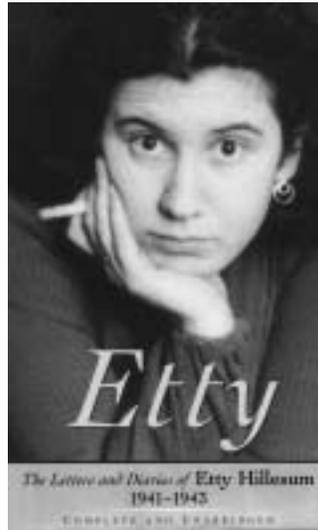
worked there for two weeks before transferring to the Westerbork transit camp as a social worker. In September 1943 she was herself transported to Auschwitz, and according to the Red Cross she was gassed on 30 November.

In February 1941 Etty had met the German chirologist<sup>3</sup> Julius Spier, with whom she started therapy while also working as his secretary. A former colleague of Jung, Spier had a major influence on Etty's psychological and spiritual development. Although their relationship was not without its ambiguities, Spier helped her deal with her depressions and exploit her inner forces. He also introduced her to the Bible. On 8 March 1941, Etty started a diary. Tormented by existential questions, she was looking for a meaning in life. She probed the depths of her self, and discovered what she came to call God.

Though Etty learnt much from her reading and from Spier, she remained independently minded. She did not 'give life short change' in order to feel secure and protected behind a 'fenced-in philosophy'. She had moments when she doubted even Spier and his friends, whom she loved dearly:

... my rejection of S. [Spier] and his circle was back. They seem far too ponderous and emphatic with their 'love' and their God, etc., etc. No doubt that my feelings are what is called ambivalent. But for Heaven's sake, why shouldn't there be room for everything inside me? In fact, everything is inside me .... The heavy and the light must be accepted as two different aspects of my being. Why deny the one aspect as soon as the other asserts itself more strongly? That is nothing but lacking the courage to be oneself. (30 November 1941)

But Etty's doubts decreased as her assertiveness increased. After Spier's death in September 1942, she said that he brought her soul to birth, and that she would commit herself to do the same for others.



<sup>3</sup>Someone who studies people's personalities by examining their hands.

Etty longed to be there for everyone instead of concentrating her life on one single human being. But before she could help anyone else, Etty needed to help herself. Spier taught her to love and to accept herself while improving herself at the same time. On 10 August 1941, she wrote to him in her diary: 'I regained contact with myself, with the deepest and best in me, which I call God, and so also with you'.

From May 1942 onwards, Jews in Holland were required to wear the yellow star, and restrictions continued to increase. Nevertheless, Etty wrote at this period about her deep joy. She gathered all her inner strength in order to live for God and with God, and to have God dwelling within her. Although she found the word 'God' somewhat primitive, saying that she did not even need it (22 June 1942), the word comes back in her diary 37 times in June 1942, 82 times in July, and 92 times between 15 September and 13 October 1942 (her last diary entry). Was she being influenced by Jung when she said that the word 'God' was a makeshift construction? She copied a quotation from Jung on 12 January 1942:

I know people for whom the encounter with the strange power within themselves was such an overwhelming experience that they called it 'God'. So experienced, 'God' too is a theory in the most literal sense, a way of looking at the world,<sup>4</sup> an image which the limited human mind creates in order to express an unfathomable and ineffable experience. The experience alone is real, not to be disputed; but the image can be soiled or broken to pieces.

The Shoah may well have shattered many conventional images of God. Yet somehow Etty discovered a real experience.

Impressed by Spier and Jung, Etty wanted to specialise in psychology herself, so as to help others (17 September 1942). But only a particularly fine psychologist would be able to listen to the deepest and best part within themselves and within the other: to let God listen to God. In June 1941, on Spier's advice, Etty therefore decided to meditate for half an hour each morning in order to listen to her inner voice. When she retired within herself, she found that she escaped from her egocentric perspective and became intimate with God; but when she moved away from her inner being, which she identified with

<sup>4</sup>'Theory' derives from a Greek verb meaning 'to look'.

God, she found herself back contemplating her navel and getting deeply depressed as a result.

Did Etty think of God primarily in terms of Jung's concept of the unconscious? Perhaps, but who can probe such depths and proclaim that the mystery of God is not present within them? There is an obvious question about how far Etty was truly encountering the otherness of God, and how far her God was merely a projection of herself. But there are several passages where Etty seems to make a distinction between her will and God's will: 'Not my will, but Thy will be done' (3 October 1942). On 16 July 1942, she wrote: 'Have You any other plans for me, God? ... what are Your plans for me?'

In Etty's writings, we find two distinctive kinds of experiences of God: a relationship with the God within her own self, and a relationship with God through creation and creatures.

Etty's sensitivity to creation and its beauty brought her intense aesthetic experiences. On 30 May 1942 she copied down a passage from Saint Augustine: 'My soul shall praise Thee in all things, God, Creator of the Universe ...'. Etty found life so beautiful and rich that it made her want to believe in God (27 March 1942). She thanked

**Etty thanked  
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dwell within  
her**

God for wanting to dwell within her (23 January 1942) and for having created her. She believed that every human being is created in God's likeness.

Indeed, this phrase from the Book of Genesis, 'created in God's likeness', became her *Leitmotiv*. She had room for everyone and everything within herself, no matter how soiled the likeness of God might appear. She expanded her heart to accommodate the whole range of reality without eliminating anything, because everything is part of God's Creation: good and bad, life and death.

This idea of wholeness became increasingly important for Etty. How did she come up with it? On 15 March 1941, Etty copied a quotation from the philosopher Will Durant:

Nowadays no one ... dares to look at life as a whole .... Everyone knows his part, but not its meaning in the play as a whole. Life is losing its purpose and is becoming empty just when it seemed so full of promise. ... We shall define philosophy as a view of the whole, as the spirit, spread out over life and forging unity out of chaos.

This way of accepting life as a whole was also central to Spier's teaching. ETTY writes: 'Paradoxical though it may sound: S. [Spier] heals people by teaching them how to suffer and accept' (14 December 1941). ETTY accepted death as a part of life, even the most horrible of deaths (2 July 1942). She kept on proclaiming her faith in God and in the beauty of God's creation, despite everything. What really mattered was,

... to be truly, inwardly happy, to accept God's world and to enjoy it without turning away from all the suffering there is. ... even if you live in an attic and have nothing but dry bread to eat, life is still worth living. ... There is so much to relish, life is rich, even though it has to be conquered from minute to minute ... (24 March 1941)

Although the noose was tightening around the Jewish population, ETTY was still capable of appreciating the beauty of a flower, or a star, or the whole creation. She asked Spier:

Isn't it almost godless to keep having such faith in God in times like these? And isn't it frivolous to go on finding life so beautiful? (2 July 1942)

Nothing, nobody could deprive her of her belief in God, or of the experience of inner freedom that came from finding life so beautiful despite everything. This may sound paradoxical when we remember the first entry in her diary: '... deep down something like a tightly wound ball of twine binds me relentlessly' (9 March 1941). But with Spier's help, ETTY learned to detach herself from whatever made her feel tied up in a bundle, and to give birth to a new self, filled with a peaceful inner freedom.

Another influence on ETTY was the writer Walter Rathenau. On three different occasions she copied down the same letter that he had written to a woman in love, including the following passage:

Be gentle with your suffering and it will be gentle with you. It grows with desire and with indignation; it is lulled to sleep by gentleness, like a little child. You have so much love in you; devote all of it to your fellow men, to children, to things, even to yourself and to your pain. (20 October 1941)

Here we see Ettty learning to accept the inevitable, even when this separates her from her loved ones. Even in her loneliness, Ettty could feel at home everywhere and at one with all.

I know two sorts of loneliness. One makes me feel dreadfully unhappy, lost and forlorn, the other makes me feel strong and happy. The first always appears when I feel out of touch with my fellow human beings, with everything, when I am completely cut off from others and from myself and can see no purpose in life or any connection between things, nor have the slightest idea where I fit in. With the other kind of loneliness, by contrast, I feel very strong and certain and connected with everyone and everything and with God, and realise that I can manage on my own and that I am not dependent upon others. Then I know that I am part of a meaningful whole and that I can impart a great deal of strength to others. (9 August 1941)

Ettty's way of accepting life as a whole brought her an immense feeling of security and trust, and a surrender that had nothing to do with desperation. Spier helped her a great deal by teaching her just to let things come and go, without her mind needing to seize and control her experiences:

I had never before felt as I did this afternoon .... And the quite simple fact is that now I just let it happen to me .... As I sat there like that in the sun, I bowed my head unconsciously as if to take in even more of that new feeling for life. Suddenly I knew deep down how someone can sink impetuously to their knees and find peace there, with their face hidden in their folded hands. (16 March 1941)

Thus it was that Ettty learned about kneeling, which is not a familiar gesture in the Jewish tradition. This kind of surrender became essential for Ettty. A surrender born of trust, and investing her with tremendous courage: '... if God does not help me to go on, then I shall have to help God' (11 July 1942), she wrote. Thus, too, Ettty committed herself to protect and to care for that deepest and best part within herself which she called God.

### **Helping God**

On 19 March 1941, Ettty quoted Spier in her diary: 'God helps those who help themselves. Whosoever help themselves, trust themselves

and their inner being, also trust in God.' She also copied the following quotation: 'Humanity is given dominion over its soul (see 2 Corinthians 5:5) and ought to husband it well; live on its spiritual strength, be inspired' (13 March 1941). Etty took dominion over her soul, over her most honoured lodger whom she called God. She would husband and help God. We might rather have expected Etty to be begging for God's help. But, convinced of God's helplessness, she decided that God needed her help:

I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. (12 July 1942)

To help means to save, rescue, succour, assist, take care of, and collaborate. Etty decided to do all of these for God. Is this so new and so *avant-garde*? Does not Paul, with whom Etty was familiar, write that we are God's servants (1 Corinthians 3:9)? We can also find in 1 Corinthians 4:1 that we are stewards of God's mysteries. A steward is someone responsible, who manages another person's property. Is not Etty the steward of God? According to Paul, stewards are expected to remain faithful. Etty wished to remain faithful to her promises to God.

How did she arrive at this faithfulness, this decision to work for God? At the beginning of her diary, as Etty was struggling against her sexual desire for Spier, she wrote:

Is it worthwhile putting up a fight? Shouldn't one just be taking what life has to offer and leave it at that? There is probably an even more banal question behind that one: who will thank you for putting up a fight, or, quite bluntly, who will give two pins? God will, no doubt, and these words suddenly pouring from my small fountain pen fill me directly with humble strength. Perhaps these

words—God will thank you for it—will turn into my salvation. (19 March 1941)

Thus Etty started to work for God and with God.

Another aspect of St Paul's image of servants and stewards in 1 Corinthians is the obedience that is required of a servant. Etty did recognise a form of authority in God:

I thank You, God, peace and quiet now reign in my great inner Domain, thanks to the strong central authority You exert. The furthest flung boundaries sense Your authority and Your love and allow themselves to be guided by You. (9 January 1942).

On the same day, she told God how much good work they were doing together. She had assigned a larger dwelling-space to God within herself, and faithfulness had become less of a struggle. She feels less and less ashamed of her deeper moments with God:

Something I have been wanting to write down for days, perhaps for weeks, but which a sort of shyness—or perhaps false shame?—has prevented me from putting into words. A desire to kneel down sometimes pulses through my body, or rather it is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling. Sometimes, in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge, head deeply bowed, hands before my face. It has become a gesture embedded in my body, needing to be expressed from time to time. And I remember: 'The girl who could not kneel', and the rough coconut matting in the bathroom.<sup>6</sup> When I write these things down, I still feel a little ashamed, as if I were writing about the most intimate of intimate matters. Much more bashful than if I had to write about my love life. But is there indeed anything as intimate as humanity's relationship to God? (3 April 1942)

Etty defended God, denying divine accountability for the senseless harm we cause one another, and insisting rather that we are accountable to God (29 June 1942). She felt ready for anything, ready to go anywhere on earth, wherever God might send her. Above all, she felt ready to bear witness unto death that life is beautiful and

<sup>6</sup> Etty here refers to where she often prayed; *The Girl Who Could Not Kneel* was the title of a novel that Etty wished to write, probably based on her own experience.

meaningful in any situation, and that it is not God's fault that things are the way they are, but our own. She said that humanity had been granted every opportunity to enter every paradise, but that we had never learnt how to take those opportunities. ETTY expected nothing from God. Instead she sought, not only to collaborate with God, but also to be responsible for God.

This brings us to another of Spier's teachings transcribed by ETTY: 'The less one expects, the more one receives' (13 March 1941). Whatever ETTY did receive was now welcomed as a gratuitous bonus. She was not even pretentious enough to expect too much from herself:

I don't fool myself about the real state of affairs, and I've even dropped the pretension that I'm out to help others. I shall merely try to help God as best I can, and if I succeed in doing that, then I shall be of use to others as well. But I mustn't have heroic illusions about that either. (11 July 1942)

ETTY struggled not to expect anything from anyone; her emphasis was on giving to others. In September 1941, she copied this passage, in which Spier quotes from the prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi:

Oh, Master, let me not yearn so much

To be consoled ... but long to console,  
To be understood ... but long to understand  
To be loved ... but long to love. (20 September 1941)<sup>7</sup>

Referring once more to this prayer, she wrote on 9 October 1942: 'Lord, make me less eager to be understood by others but make me understand them'. ETTY wanted to console, to understand and to love God by consoling, understanding and loving others. Were they not all created in God's likeness?

It is difficult to know where her idea of helping God came from. In an undated letter, probably written in July 1942 from Amsterdam, ETTY addresses herself to Spier in these words:

You must look after your health; if you want to help God, then that is your first, your sacred duty. A man like you, one of the few to

<sup>7</sup> The ellipses and the eccentric formatting are in ETTY's original.

provide decent shelter for a portion of life and suffering and God (most people have capitulated long ago, and 'life' and 'suffering' and 'God' have become so many empty sounds for them), has the sacred duty to maintain his body, 'his earthly mansion', as well as he can, to offer God hospitality in it for as long as possible .... This slice of the epoch in which we live is something I can bear, that I can shoulder without collapsing under its heavy weight, and I can already forgive God for allowing things to be as they probably must be. To have enough love in oneself to be able to forgive God!!

On reading this remarkable passage, we can only ask what Etty meant by this. Who is the God who allowed all this horror to happen, and whom she forgave? Is this a God whom we can all carry within us? A God for whom we are all responsible? A God who created all of us in the divine likeness, giving us the freedom to mirror that likeness—a likeness of unconditional love? Quoting Spier, Etty wrote: 'He says, "these are times to apply the saying: love your enemies". And if we do say that, surely we must also believe that it can be done?' (25 July 1942)

On 15 September 1942, as Spier was dying (of natural causes), Etty gave thanks for all he had done for her: he had dug God up in her, bringing God to life; and she would now go on digging and seeking God in all the human hearts she met, no matter where they might be. It was in these terms that Etty committed herself to God. She promised to find a dwelling and a refuge for God in as many houses as possible, which meant in as many people as possible, for we are the houses of God. She would follow the path of King David, who refused to rest until he had found a dwelling for the Holy of Holies. Etty refused to abandon God. She would remain faithful to that best part of herself which she called God, and to that best part of others which she also called God, so that God might remain faithful to God. Etty wanted to survive,



and to bear witness to the fact that God was living, even in those terrible times (27 July 1942).

Etty would struggle when she was in Westerbork not to let herself be consumed by concern for her family. In one of her last letters from Westerbork, undated but written after 18 August 1943, she wrote:

I know that we must not lose ourselves so completely in grief and concern for our families that we have little thought or love left for our neighbours. More and more I tend toward the idea that love for everyone who may cross your path, love for everyone made in God's image, must rise above love for blood relatives. Please don't misunderstand me. It may seem unnatural—And I see that it is still far too difficult for me to write about, though so simple to live.

In June 1943, Etty gave her eleven notebooks to a friend, Maria Tuinzing, just as Etty's special status as a social worker in Westerbork was about to be revoked. She asked Maria to hold on to them until she returned home; were she never to return, she asked that Maria pass them on to another friend, the writer Klaas Smelik. Etty had the intuition that she had a task to accomplish with her writing: 'I feel that I am one of many heirs to a great spiritual heritage. I shall be its faithful guardian. I shall share it as best I can.' (18 September 1942)

Etty wanted to love every human being fervently, because she believed that a part of God is buried in us all. After Spier's death, Etty wrote of him:

... great discerner, God-seeker, and God-finder that you were. You sought God in every human heart that opened up before you—and how many there were!—and found a little bit of Him in each one. (15 September 1942)

Her words echo Jeremiah 29:10-14:

For thus says the LORD ... when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD ....

Etty certainly invoked God, prayed to God, and sought for God. Eventually, she found God, and her life became an uninterrupted dialogue with God.

At Westerbork, a friend sent her a treatise by Dr Korff entitled: 'And yet God is Love'. This appeared truer to her than ever before (29 June 1943). If God is love, as we can read in 1 John 4—with which Etty was familiar—then it is only through love that God is recognisable.

Etty decided to love, choosing love above all. This was not a matter of feeling. The feeling of love failed her at times, and was certainly rare in the world surrounding her. Moreover, the absence of hatred in no way implies the absence of moral indignation. But only love can make better times possible. Etty experienced a love beyond feelings, like 'an elemental glow that sustains you'. The person loved, she discovered, 'has hardly anything to do with it' (8 August 1943).<sup>8</sup> In a letter dated to the end of December 1942, she wrote:

And I also believe, childishly perhaps but stubbornly, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter.

### **Why God Nowadays?**

After Auschwitz, most people's images of God were shattered. But Etty drew on her own experiences, observations and intuitions rather than believing that she had to get everything out of books. What she learnt from Spier enabled her to find her own voice before God and to radiate God's love further. Addressing herself to Spier, shortly after his death, she wrote:

You taught me to speak the name of God without embarrassment. You were the mediator between God and me, and now you, the mediator, have gone, and my path leads straight to God. It is right that it should be so. And I shall be the mediator for any other I can reach. (15 September 1942)

In Judaism, the idea of walking with God is richly significant. She committed herself to walk for God and with God no matter what happened:

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Maria Tuinzing.

For once you have begun to walk with God, you need only keep on walking with Him and all of life becomes on long stroll—such a marvellous feeling .... (14 July 1942)

Etty's sense of God, as eclectic as that of many people today, enabled her to face the unbearable without committing suicide:

Had all of this happened to me only a year ago, I should certainly have collapsed within three days, committed suicide, or pretended to a false kind of cheerfulness. But now I am filled with such equanimity, endurance, and calmness that I can see things very clearly and have an inkling of how they fit together. I don't know what it is, but despite everything I am very well, dear God. (23 July 1942)

Why talk of God nowadays? Etty suggests that God helps us transcend fear by faith, listening to the inner life within ourselves and within others. God gives us a reason for living, and encourages us to preserve harmony in our inner households, filled as they are with so many conflicting, disparate elements. God helps us to keep believing in humanity, to find the strength to live in the present moment and the courage to trust in it, to live in a spirit of praise and gratitude for the life which is beautiful despite everything. But perhaps the most important reason for speaking of God is a fundamental desire: in the end, we wish to walk for God and with God, simply out of God's love.

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