

Power: Might, Vulnerability, Impotence, Powerlessness?

Source Sheet by Zohar Atkins

Traditional theology celebrates an all-powerful God; traditional politics seeks to distribute power to the downtrodden. But what exactly is power, and how might impotence, vulnerability, and powerlessness be inscribed in its very workings?

Psalms 29

(1) A psalm of David. Ascribe to the LORD, O divine beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. (2) Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name; bow down to the LORD, majestic in holiness. (3) The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over the mighty waters. (4) The voice of the LORD is power; the voice of the LORD is majesty; (5) the voice of the LORD breaks cedars; the LORD shatters the cedars of Lebanon. (6) He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion, like a young wild ox. (7) The voice of the LORD kindles flames of fire; (8) the voice of the LORD convulses the wilderness; the LORD convulses the wilderness of Kadesh; (9) the voice of the LORD causes hinds to calve, and strips forests bare; while in His temple all say “Glory!” (10) The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood; the LORD sits enthroned, king forever. (11) May the LORD grant strength to His people; may the LORD bestow on His people wellbeing.

Ecclesiastes 8:8

(8) No man has authority over the lifebreath—to hold back the lifebreath; there is no authority over the day of death. There is no mustering out from that war; wickedness is powerless to save its owner.

תהילים כ"ט

(א) מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד הַקָּבוֹד לַיהוָה בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים הַקָּבוֹד לַיהוָה
 לְהַשְׁתַּחֲוֹת וְעֹז: (ב) הַקָּבוֹד לַיהוָה כְּבוֹד שְׁמוֹ
 הַשְׁתַּחֲוֹתוּ לַיהוָה בַּהֲדַר־קִדְשׁ: (ג) קוֹל הַיָּם
 עַל־הַמַּיִם אֱלֹהֵי־הַכְּבוֹד הִרְעִים הַיָּם עַל־מַיִם
 רַבִּים: (ד) קוֹל־הַיָּם בְּכַחַת קוֹל הַיָּם בַּהֲדַר: (ה)
 קוֹל הַיָּם שֹׁבֵר אַרְצִים וְיֹשֵׁב הַיָּם אֶת־אֲרָצוֹת
 הַלְּבָנוֹן: (ו) וַיִּרְקַעֲנָם כְּמוֹ־עֵגֶל לְבָנוֹן וְשָׂרִיז
 כְּמוֹ־בֹדֵאִים: (ז) קוֹל־הַיָּם חֹצֵב לְהַבֹּת
 אֲשׁ: (ח) קוֹל הַיָּם יִתֵּל מִדְּבַר יִתֵּל הַיָּם מִדְּבַר
 קִדְשׁ: (ט) קוֹל הַיָּם יַחֲלֵל אֵילֹת וַיִּחַשְׁפוּ
 יַעֲרֹת וּבַהֲיַכְּלוֹ כָּלוּ אִמֵּר כְּבוֹד: (י) הַיָּם
 לְמַבּוּל יִשָּׁב וַיִּשָּׁב הַיָּם מִלְּפָנֶיךָ לְעוֹלָם: (יא) הַיָּם
 עֹז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן הַיָּם יִבְרַךְ אֶת־עַמּוֹ
 בְּשָׁלוֹם:

What is the effect of power in this psalm? How does it work? What does it mean that God's voice is power itself? What's the quality of God's power in this psalm? How does power relate to other divine attributes?

קהלת ח':ח

(ח) אֵין אָדָם שְׁלִיט בְּרוּחַ לְכַלּוֹא אֶת־הָרוּחַ
 וְאֵין שְׁלִטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת וְאֵין מְשַׁלַּחַת
 בַּמְּלַחְמָה וְלֹא־יִמְלֹט רָשָׁע אֶת־בְּעָלָיו:

Job 37:23**איוב ל"ז:כ"ג**

(23) Shaddai—we cannot attain to Him;
He is great in power and justice And
abundant in righteousness; He does not
torment.

(כג) שֵׁדֵי לֹא־מִצְאָנָהוּ וְשִׂגְיָא־כֹּחַ וּמְשֹׁפֵט
וְרֵב־צְדָקָה לֹא יַעֲנֶה:

If God's power is unattainable or incomparable to our own, what does that imply for how we understand power itself?

***Power*, by Adrienne Rich**

Living in the earth-depositis of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth
one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old
cure for fever or melancholy a tonic
for living on this earth in the winters of this climate

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:
she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness
her body bombarded for years by the element
she had purified
It seems she denied to the end
the source of the cataracts on her eyes
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power

Why do power and wounds come from the same source? How is power related to denial? Why is this poem called "Power"? How does power move in and through the poem?

"My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement ("union") with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on."

Nietzsche, "Will to Power," Para. 636

"Powerlessness is not impotence that, lacking power and having to do without it, still remains related precisely to power." Heidegger, GA 66:188

"Don't play what's there, play what's not there."

Miles Davis

