

The Flame of the Swirling Sword

להט החרב המתהפכת

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One of the legacies of Nahman of Breslov is *hitbodedut*. Perhaps best translated as “aloneness” or “seclusion”, *hitbodedut* is a time for intimate communication between man and his Creator. As opposed to the fixed text of prayer and its macro significance, *hitbodedut* is intended to be a spontaneous conversation on the micro level and Nahman urged his disciples to engage in this heartfelt activity on a daily basis. Rabbi Nahman, a complex man of strong feelings, instructed that *hitbodedut* was best practiced outdoors. This isn't surprising; even though it can be difficult to sense God – let alone to commune with Him – while in a mundane setting, the beauty of a spectacular outdoor scene can more reliably evoke in us a sense of wonder of the awesomeness of Creation and, thus, of God as Creator.

Each August our family of four spends time in a very small, off-the-beaten-path town on the coast of Maine – one of the remaining lobstering towns. While the lobsters themselves are forbidden to us, the annual lobster boat races are not – and we, along with the rest of the town, are eager spectators at the competition. We adore our town in Maine and the yellow house where we stay and fantasize each year about moving there - but the complete absence of Jewish life makes even the fantasy a short-lived one.

A couple of miles down the road from the cottage in which we stay is an active lighthouse; it's one of the most beautifully situated and accessible of those remaining in Maine. The lighthouse is perched above a steep and rocky coastline where we like to scramble among the rocks and take in the raw power of the ocean. Even were it not for the energy of the ocean, the rocks alone, in their wondrous formations, would evoke deep contemplation.

There is a particular place on the rocks where I like to sit by myself, a place which naturally leads to *hitbodedut*. My favorite place allows me to sit above a sheer face of rock against which, especially around low tide, the ocean approaches from several directions at once. The swirling waves which result crash into the rock, sending dramatic sprays of water up well above me, landing within just inches of where I sit. If I move closer to the water and sit under where the spray lands, the experience is even more exhilarating.

As I watched the swirling waters mixing together a few days ago the image of *tohu vavohu* at Genesis 1:1, “and the earth was *tohu vavohu*” - sometimes translated as “astonishing emptiness” or “chaos” - came to me. Out of the blue, different themes I had been contemplating over the past year – a verse of Torah, a small portion of the Yom Kippur liturgy, and a particular aspect of our relationship to God - came together, as did the waters below me.

Almost thirty years ago I wrote, for a comparative religion class, a paper that I began with a personal interpretation of Genesis 3:24. The verse, dealing with the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, concludes with the words typically translated as "...and He placed to the east (*mi-kedem*) of the Garden of Eden the cherubim and the swirling fiery sword to guard (*lishmor*) the way to the Tree of Life". I reversed the meaning, however, seeing in this verse not the finality of punishment but the promise of ultimate reconciliation, translating the text as "...and He established, *from time immemorial*, the medium of *symbolic language* to *preserve* the way to the Tree of Life."

It's crucial to review some of the Hebrew text to understand how this interpretation can be reached. First, the word *kedem*, one of the meanings of which is indeed "east", is also used to mean "days of old", as when we recite *hadash yameynu k'kedem* - "Renew our days as of old" - when returning the sefer Torah to the Ark. Next, the word *lishmor* certainly means "to guard", but it can mean to guard in the sense of preserving as well as meaning to guard in the sense of barring. Finally, I interpret *lahat haherev hamithapekhet* - the literal translation of which is "the flame of the swirling sword" - to be a metaphor for symbolic language as a whole, in that the expression conveys a sense of the numinous while lacking any objective meaning or established referent.

The essence of symbolism in a religious context is that it permits us to relate to phenomena that lack corporeal form or objective reality by providing reference to phenomena with which, we believe, we have objective familiarity. In other words, our communication with the unknowable God requires symbolism because we have no way of knowing or understanding God in His fullness; it is only by expressing our relationship with God through concepts which apply to our earthly lives that we can begin to explore the higher truths of our relationship.

This time of year is replete with symbolism and metaphor. Chief among the various motifs of the *yamim nora'im* is that of God as King and Judge, and Israel as His subjects and subject to His judgment. He is our father and we are His children; He is our creator and we are His handiwork - and the list continues. The piyyut *Anu ameykha* alone contains a list of twelve metaphors for our relationship; the *Un'taneh Tokef* contains the poignant image of sheep being counted as they pass under the staff of their shepherd; and even the traditional greeting for this time of year is based on the image of our names being written in the Book of Life.

There is a tradition that Rosh HaShanah is, in fact, the birthday of the world, and the New Year is, in its awe-filled observance, a celebration of this fact; it is a renewal of the relationship between God and His Creation and between God and humankind. Throughout our liturgy we ask for forgiveness for our transgressions; we ask for compassion for our weaknesses; we resolve to act better so as better to serve God who, we recite, desires not the death of those who behave reprehensibly, but that they foresake evil and return to Him.

In light of this mood of hope and of a liturgy centered around the determination of man to reach out to God in humility and love, there is one part of the Yom Kippur liturgy which seems out of place and which I for many years found especially fascinating and, frankly, troubling.

The section of the liturgy to which I'm referring is in the *Eleh Ezkerah* – “These [things] I remember...” – recited during the repetition by the *shaliach tzibbur* of the Musaf Amidah. The *Eleh Ezkerah* is a piyyut detailing, quite graphically, the executions by torture of ten Talmudic sages by the Romans.

The part of the *Eleh Ezkerah* that I find most interesting is, unfortunately, omitted from the version of the piyyut found in the Conservative Mahzor for the High Holidays. In the traditional text, immediately following the description of the brutal death of Rabbi Yishmael, we find the following:

שִׂרְפֵי מַעְלָה צָעֲקוּ בְמָרָה, זֹו תּוֹרָה וְזֶה שְׂכָרָה עֲטָה כְּשִׁלְמָה אִוְרָה, אִוִּיב
מִנְאֵץ שְׂמֵךְ הַגְּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא, וּמְחַרְףּ וּמְגַדֵּף עַל דְּבָרֵי תּוֹרָה.

עֲנָתָה בַת קוֹל מְשָׁמִים, אִם אֲשַׁמַּע קוֹל אַחַר אֲהַפּוֹךְ אֶת הָעוֹלָם לְמַיִם, לְתַהוֹ
וְבָהוּ אֲשִׁית הַדּוֹמָיִם, גְּזָרָה הִיא מִלְפָּנַי, קִבְלוּהָ מִשְׁעֲשְׁעֵי דַת יוֹמָיִם.

The seraphim above cried out bitterly, “This is the Torah and its reward, oh God who wraps Himself in light? The enemy despises your great and awesome name, and disdains and reviles the words of the Torah!”

A divine voice answered from Heaven, “If I hear another voice I will turn the world to water, back to tohu vavohu I will transform the earth: This is my decree; accept it, you who delight in the Torah!”

Wow. Does this correspond with what we perceive these days to be about? Does this God – who would turn the world back to *tohu vavohu* - correspond with the God otherwise portrayed in the *mahzor* or, indeed, with the God to whom we seek to draw near during the other days of the year? The *Eleh Ezkerah* also is included in the liturgy for *Tishah b'Av*, and of this we can make sense, because it calls to mind a terrible time in our history and increases our sadness at our suffering and exile. But even on *Tishah b'Av* how can we reconcile this part of the piyyut with our attempt to reaffirm our commitment to a just and forgiving God and to His *mitzvot*? Indeed, given the fate that befell those sages who were so meticulous in their devotion to Torah, what incentive is there for us to draw nearer to the Torah?

These two sentences of the *Eleh Ezkerah* always fascinated me because they seem to portray God in such a negative light. The first image they call to my mind is that of the impetuous child who, unhappy with the progress of the game, threatens to overturn the gameboard. This brief exchange between God and the *serafim* seems, at first blush, to depict an angry God, an insensitive God, a mean-spirited and controlling God; here we are confronted with man's utter helplessness in light of God's unimaginable power.

But is that the case?

I believe that, upon closer examination, we can turn our first impression on its head. We can learn from this dramatic episode not about man's insignificance but, rather, about our great importance; and not about God's anger or vindictiveness but, rather, about His willingness to impose limitations on His own power in order to establish a truer partnership between Him and us.

How can one derive this?

I remember a professor of mine, who was also a rabbi, once asking me about my concept of God; I included in my answer three adjectives often attributed to God: omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. In polite language my professor apprised me of my naivete and taught me about how un-Jewish my answer was. God certainly isn't omnipotent, he informed me, for *God cannot make man sin*. So sin, as destructive as it can be, lies entirely within our own hands.

Realize the significance of this fact: if sin, as damaging as it can be - by how it distances us from God, thus postponing redemption - is within our control, then God is, to some extent, a prisoner to our behavior. Neither God nor man is truly omnipotent as far as our relationship is concerned: we each are subject to each other and we each experience helplessness to some extent, the overcoming of which requires the participation of the both parties.

I believe the *Eleh Ezkerah* tells us not of a God who, in anger at being challenged threatens to destroy the world out of spite, but of a God who, in utter grief at the evil he sees visited upon His beloved by others who are also His children, contemplates undoing Creation altogether. But that doesn't fit the divine plan; the ultimate repair of this state of affairs must occur through a process that sees evil eradicated from within, not by divine fiat. Destroying the world merely sets everything back to the first step; it doesn't lead us more quickly to a successful ending. The *g'zeyrah* is not that suffering be meted out to righteous individuals, but that *tikkun olam* - the *kedem* to which we yearn to return - can only be attained as the conclusion to a process which must be seen through to its completion. The *m'sha'sh'ey dat yomayim* are those who, out of their love for God and Torah, accept that *kedem* must be achieved by moving forward - in Hebrew, *kadimah* - literally, "toward *kedem*" - despite the difficulties of the journey. Their dedication is such that it would be unthinkable to subvert the process, even if it would put an end to their suffering.

There is a great deal of explicit symbolism in the *mahzor* and, as we've seen in at least one case, there is also hidden symbolism to be found. This short passage we've contemplated speaks to man's responsibility as a partner with God in the great cosmic drama. That our actions can lead so precipitously close to destruction speaks loudly about our role in the ongoing drama of Creation - the renewal of which we are now observing - and the responsibilities that Judaism places upon us. Our faith teaches us not to denigrate this world but to realize its true source, to elevate it through our behavior in general and through the *mitzvot* in particular.

As we celebrate God's kingship over Creation, this time of year calls for us to reassert our allegiance to the Creator. A crucial element of this renewed allegiance to God is our obligation to renew our commitment to one another, so that God may delight in all of His children. By delving into the *Eleh Ezkerah* passage we've caught a glimpse of how important this can be; I can't help but wonder how many times near calamity has been averted. More than ever we must confront the fact that it is incumbent upon us to insure that Creation not be returned to *tohu vavohu*.

I had wanted for many months to write about the *Eleh Ezkerah* passage but found myself, as time wore on, unable to understand it and unable to relate it to the power of symbolic language or to our relationship with our Creator. As the deadline for Orot approached and the themes I had been contemplating remained, for me, unconnected I decided that I wouldn't submit anything this year. Had I not been sitting alone surrounded by ocean on that particular rock on that particular day I've no idea if I would yet perceive that which, in an instant, became clear to me. As I watched, heard, and felt the ocean churn in that place so distant from my everyday life and so separated from Jewish life, meaning arrived unexpectedly. I couldn't help but laugh; apparently, even in Maine, sometimes you *can* get there from here...