

Mah T'va'keish: What Do You Seek? Renewal, Perspective, and Peace

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*Good Yontif.....*A story is told of an observant Jew who was a living contradiction in his observance. He followed the mitzvot carefully, but at the same time, he also happened to be a pick-pocket. One day, the man found a watch that had been lost. And so, wanting to fulfill the mitzvah of *'hashavat aveidah'* – the obligation of returning a lost article – he brought it to the rabbi's office. The rabbi thanked him. But, after the man left, the rabbi realized that his wallet was missing. Knowing that the man with him earlier was a pick pocket, the rabbi called him back. He inquired and the man had to tell the truth. He had, indeed, taken the wallet. The rabbi asked him how he could reconcile these two acts: returning the watch and picking his pocket. "Well," said the man, "The Torah says that one must return a lost article. That's a mitzvah. But rabbi.....business is business!"

The story is good for a many reasons: the chutzpa of picking the rabbi's pocket – in his office, no less. The ironic punch-line in a Jewish story that somehow business trumps Torah. But, on a more serious note, one of the things that the story highlights is a very real tension that many of us experience --- that of knowing what Jewish tradition counsels on the one hand - and the very real pull that we feel as we try to make our way in the world – on the other.

We know, for example, that learning and prayer, Shabbat, Tikkun Olam – repairing the world, and being an active part of a caring community are mitzvot that are essential to Judaism. And, at the very same time, we know quite well how hard it is to just make it through our daily responsibilities.

This past summer, Emily, the kids, and I once again headed up to Stowe, Vermont for vacation. As I've shared in the past, Stowe is glorious – and the time that we spend there special.

Part of the daily ritual that I enjoy is waking up early – sometimes before the kids get up - and heading into town to get coffee for Em and for me, a newspaper, and maybe a treat for Liana and Jonah. The condo that we rent looks out over a beautiful view of nearby rolling green mountains. Often, however, in the hours of early morning – even if the forecast for the day is for clear bright skies - a thick cloud hovers over and blankets these mountains. Sitting in the quiet of morning one day – looking at those mountains and that fog – I couldn't help but think about people.....and about how so many of us live: the all-embracing cloud of activity that surrounds us – the feeling of being pulled in more directions than we can handle - the ever-present pressures and concerns that weigh.

Sometimes, for us, our need to "do" can seem overwhelming. Recently, an article appeared in the "Globe" that focused on the creation of new vocabulary and trends in our increasingly techno-centric world. Amongst the questions asked was whether you or someone that you love suffers from BDD - "Blackberry Deficit Disorder." BDD, the columnist explains is that twitching that happens when your Blackberry is buzzing....but you aren't able to check it! In some way, we all know the feeling.

But the truth of the matter is that it is not only our responsibilities that surround us on all sides – the challenges experienced in our world weigh heavily as well: a sense of helplessness – and even hopelessness - in the wake of an economic crisis that has touched all of us - a national political climate of anger and bitter distrust that has practically eclipsed those who wish to engage in thoughtful debate on important issues – genuine concerns about how best to remain healthy....and safe.

In the mountains of Vermont – the sun is a blessing: it rises - burns off the mist – a new day. There is clarity – an expansive view – complete perspective. In our lives, though, from where does that help come?

Returning to the story of the rabbi and the pick pocket – both the rabbi and the reader understand that when it comes to “the business of living” and “the living of Torah” we are not presented with an “either-or.” Rather – it is actually a “both-and.” Torah, we are taught, informs daily life – and often does a very good job of helping us make sense of a world that sometimes doesn’t.

Va’Yi’ma’tzeihu Ish...V’hinei to’eh (Yoseph) ba’sadeh.

And Joseph was wandering in the field...and there, a man encountered him.

One of the most powerful narratives in the entire Bible is that of Joseph. A dreamer who – at an early age - was shunned by his brothers and his parents for visions that even he did not fully understand. In one chapter of Joseph’s young life, he is sent by his father, Jacob, to journey to a place called Shechem so that he might find his brothers. Though the journey would take some days and Joseph was uncertain about the reception that he would receive – Joseph went – in solitude, making his way.

Now, in the study of Torah - where the written text ends – the imagination of the rabbis begins. Later rabbinic literature paints a picture of a troubled Joseph – a man with a great deal on his mind – confused, struggling, and unsure of himself. In fact, the Hebrew word used in Genesis to describe Joseph’s “wandering” is not the typical word for wander: “ho’lech,” -- but rather the less common verb: “To’eh” – a word that actually means: “has gone astray” - “wanders aimlessly.” It also happens to be related to the Hebrew word for “perplexed.”

Arriving in Shechem, Joseph – we learn – is unable to find his brothers. However, while in the field, he does encounter a man – a mysterious stranger. Once again, because inquiring minds want to know, the rabbis reveal his identity. The man is none other than an angel – a messenger who had been sent by G-d.

Angels – certainly - are not new to the Torah at this point in Genesis. It was an angel who shared the news with Sarah that she would give birth to a baby boy when she was in her nineties. It was an angel who later saved that boy’s life in the portion that we read this morning. And it was an angel who had wrestled with Joseph’s own father, Jacob – blessed him – and changed his name to Israel. So, for the rabbis, that Joseph would encounter an angel at this difficult moment in life was not such an imaginative stretch.

While in the fields, the man approaches Joseph and asks him a single, yet profound question: “Mah T’vakeish?” – “What do you seek?” In the Torah story, Joseph calmly responds and his journey continues. However, according to the rabbinic wisdom, the angel’s question was not intended for Joseph alone. These words, we are taught, linger still.

Jewish tradition sees in Joseph’s journey a parallel to our own. While there are moments when we make our way forward strong, confident, and with clarity...there are other times when we find ourselves to be more like Joseph – more caught up and confused about our path and direction. During these times, our rabbis tell us, the question of the angel is directed to us: Amongst all that we are experiencing in this life.... “Mah T’vakeish?”..... “What is it that you seek?”

It is one of the reasons that we gather during these Holy Days.... separating ourselves as we do from everything else going....To be here.... to be with one another...and to consider: “Are we living as we should...as we want?” “What is it...and who is it...that truly matter to us? --- Are we there for them...and others....and ourselves?”

Zen teaching would describe this as a time to quote: “settle on the self.” We do so because, in the words of Annie Dillard, we live in all that we seek.” And because, as the Rabbi of Levov once taught: “we can only be redeemed to the extent to which we recognize ourselves.”

That each of us journeys throughout our lives is a metaphor found throughout Jewish tradition. The forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Abraham and Sarah's going forth at G-d's invitation. The travels of Joseph to Shechem that we recalled earlier. For me, though, one more recent experience brought this journey metaphor even closer to home.

A few months ago, I joined Facebook. Now, I must confess... I did so reluctantly. Not because I have anything against social networking or computers – I just didn't understand what Facebook was all about and wasn't sure whether it was something that I really needed.

For those not familiar, simply put: Facebook is an on-line networking program that enables members to create a personal home page – complete with your own 'messaging wall' that posts people's comments and greetings. Users then connect with other people that they either invite or accept as friends. Today, world-wide, Facebook has over 250 million members.

Given this then - once I signed up - I suppose that I shouldn't have been surprised when I started receiving invitations to be people's friends.

At first, the notes were from people that I knew quite well. My brother. Friends and colleagues around the country. Even friends from the temple community.....But then other invitations started arriving in my "in" box – with names that I hadn't heard or had even thought about in years: Kids-who-were-no-longer-kids that I knew at the Glenwood School in Malden – people I knew at Brown Junior High – Brandeis – my Year in Israel program. Each name triggered memories of people, relationships, and experiences that were so distant it was as if they had been lived many lifetimes ago.

For me as a rabbi, the Facebook phenomenon is fascinating for a number of reasons. First of all – as a lover of Israel - the whole idea of sending a message via a wall strikes me as a very Jewish thing to do.

And second, there's something about the very name "Facebook."

If we translate this word into Hebrew – we get "Sefer HaPanim." Now, Panim is an interesting word because while it means "face" – in the singular – the form of the word is actually PLURAL. And so "Sefer HaPanim" can not only be translated as "Facebook" but also as "the book of faces." And, in a way, that's what it is: a vivid reminder of the many faces of our lifetimes --- a reminder of how far we have traveled in our own life's journey.

This *yontif* – as we look to a different book – "Sefer HaChayim" - our Book of Life – we are called upon to consider not only from whence we have come....but in how we will live out our future. Mindful of this – the angel's question calls: Mah T'va'keish? – "What is it that you seek?"

One of the problems, however, is that sometimes the words that we speak here – in the sanctuary....the feelings we experience – the promises that we make.....fail to get translated into our lives out there. In the words of one great rabbinic sage: "Often, what happens in temple.....stays in temple." --- Or, put another way – we get out there...and succumb to: "business is business."

It is why we are taught that our prayer and our pausing, our being with community and our fasting cannot be about this place and these days alone. Rather, we must allow them to inform how we approach our everyday.

John Luther Adams is a contemporary composer whose music has received national acclaim. A number of years ago, Adams wrote a moving article detailing how he created a piece entitled: "The Immeasurable Space of Tones."

Writing in a journal format, Adams shares not only the creative progression of this particular piece – from inspiration to research to writing – but also how he approaches the composition of all of his works.

In one passage, Adams observes: “(In my profession,) during busy periods of performance and teaching, I hear a great deal of music. And just as I might need to fast following a period of feasting on rich foods, after several months of intense listening my ears tell me that they need a time of rest from music. As I begin new work, my hope is that fasting may help me to hear sounds that I haven’t heard before, and to hear familiar sounds with new ears.”

One Hasidic story explains it this way: One day the great Rabbi of Berdichev saw a man hurrying along the path – looking neither to the right or to the left. The Rabbi asked the man, “Why are you hurrying so?” The man replied: “I am after my livelihood.” The rabbi responded, “And how do you know that your livelihood is running on before you - that you have to rush after it? Perhaps,” he continued, “what you seek is behind you – that with all your running, you are running away from it - and if you just stand still, it will catch up to you.”

As we take this time to pause during our Holiest of Days....in search of the renewal, promise, and prospective that they represent....we offer heartfelt prayer.

Dear G-d, when our lives weigh too heavily upon us –
our vision clouded – our energies waning, give us – please –
the strength to live with patience and thoughtfulness.

Help us, O G-d, to strive for clarity – to embrace our better selves –
to live in harmony with what we genuinely seek.

When we struggle in our hearts, stay by our side.

And may the true business of our lives
come to be filling our days – and the days of others –
with blessing, goodness, and love.

Amen.