

Dvar Torah – Shabbat Shuvah – ‘12

Last Spring, the poet Tracy Smith won the Pulitzer Prize for her slim volume entitled Life on Mars. The daughter of one of the engineers of the Hubble Telescope and a professor of creative writing at Princeton, she explores the fraught intersection of space and earth, astronomy and theology in her poems. She begins her book with the following poem:

*Is G-d being or pure force? The wind
Or what commands it? When our lives slow
And we can hold all that we love, it sprawls
In our laps like a gangly doll. When the storm
Kicks up and nothing is ours, we go chasing
After all we're certain to lose, so alive-
Faces radiant with panic.*

She takes on some heavy subjects – our understanding of and relationship to G-d, the challenges of belief, the texture of the universe and our walk through it. She doesn't shy away from the contradictions, tensions, or questions we face each day; she dwells right there in the hallways of uncertainty.

This past year at Kol Sasson has, perhaps unintentionally, spun around the axis of uncertainty. We brought in several teachers this year and again and again, we could not get away from this topic. Samuel Klein spoke about our dance with uncertainty. David Shyovitz broached the question of how we handle inconsistency and contradiction in Torah; he took us up to the edge of that tension and left us standing on the precipice. Ben Katz gave us an historical perspective on the tolerance for deep theological questioning in Judaism. Rabbi Josh Feigelson stressed the importance of asking the big meaningful questions that get at the substance of Jewish life.

As a community, we have been traversing that road for sometime now. Each talk was provocative and thoughtful in new ways, and the reality of personal theological struggle was valorized and valued. Yet, I found myself returning to the same question – so I am comfortable confronting my Judaism and my beliefs with honesty and I am willing to ask those big questions and struggle with those inherent asymmetries – but in the end what do I do if my struggle and my questions do not bring me back neatly to tradition? In other words, what do I do if this journey is honest and real, yet encounters real doubt? Because if I am honest in my search, there will likely be moments of doubt. And that question was not answered for me.

Today, on this Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we return to shul still enveloped by the words and the textures of the tefillot of the machzor. There are powerful images there – we speak of G-d as king, as father, as creator,

as supreme and omnipotent. Many parts of our liturgy on these days are clear and decisive – strong depictions of G-d, unwavering images of divine justice and supremacy. And then, there are also quiet but equally powerful moments of doubt. Right after the unetaneh tokef, in the musaf for Rosh Hashanah, we recite the litany of possible fates for the year ahead – *mi yichyeh, u'mi yamut, my be'kitzo u'mi lo be'kitzo...*

After the assertive declarations of G-d's power and primacy, we offer these genuine expressions of human doubt – we do not know what lies ahead for any of us. We acknowledge that uncertainty and our own human limitations.

So there seems to be some space for this type of questioning confrontation in the machzor, but historically, Jewish doubt has not always been accepted. Anything but. The Talmud speaks of the apostate, Elisha ben Abuya, who explored Greek philosophy and culture and questioned divine schar ve'onesh, and thereafter, the rabbis refrained from even pronouncing his name. He became known as “Acher”, the Other. In the 12th century, Maimonides reproached those who shied away from engaging in deep philosophical speculation – in fact, he deemed it one of the highest mitzvoth - , yet he was branded as a heretic by some rabbinic authorities for some of his assertions and arguments in his Guide for the Perplexed. In the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated for publicly questioning divine providence and divine authorship of the Torah.

So, this honest admittance of doubt has not always gone smoothly. But if we are reaching for emunah shelemah – a whole, real, and coherent faith, then that faith needs to be not merely functional, but one that speaks to and engages one's wholeness, one's heart, mind, and soul in an honest way. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes movingly about the nature of faith:

“Every one of us, at least once in our lifetime, has been able to perceive the existence of the Creator. Every one of us, at least once, has merited a glimpse of the beauty, the serenity, and the strength which flow from the souls of those who have walked with G-d. However, such feelings and inspirations are not common occurrences. In the lives of most people, they are as meteors which flare up for a moment and then disappear from sight...Faith means: to guard forever the echo which once burst upon the deep recesses of our soul.”

But in between those rare meteoric moments of connection, there is bound to be some doubt – safek. Substantive doubt is that space between faith and denial, and it issues from a search for personal truth and meaning. But doubt is heavy. It can be paralyzing and can grind away at conviction and commitment.

Aviva Zornberg offers an analysis of the story of the Akeidah – read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah – that stands as a cautionary tale on the danger of doubt. Zornberg refers to a poignant midrash on the story. After his near-sacrifice, Isaac returns to Sarah, and she ask him “Where have you been, my son?” And when she learns what has happened, she says “Were it not for the angel, you would already be slaughtered??” Then she screams and wails, and immediately dies. Zornberg tells us

that Sarah dies from the pain of existential doubt – that *kim'at shelo nishchat* – the acknowledgement of the “hair’s breadth that separates death from life.” Once she realized the true fragility and “contingency” of human existence, she expired from the weight of that truth. The recognition that she had no control over her child’s life killed her. I think that every parent can understand that existential terror; its constant recognition can be too much to bear on a daily basis.

This is one form of doubt. There can be many others, if we are brave enough and honest enough to let them in. Doubt can be terribly painful and unsettling, but the alternative may be a Jewish practice that is unexamined, inconsistent, and less-than-honest.

So what do I do with this doubt? Where do I put it? How can I acknowledge it, utilize it, value it and maybe even elevate it?

In my search, I found several sources of insight.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, in an essay entitled “Faith and Doubt,” tackles these questions head-on. He readily admits that most Jews have moments and areas of real doubt, and Jewish leaders and thinkers need to recognize and confront them. While he asserts that theological doubt should never affect one’s halachic practice or “functional faith,” as he calls it, doubt still exists and must be handled thoughtfully.

He argues that substantive doubt can be encountered and elevated by seeking to engage with G-d’s presence in unmediated ways. He says that we can find access to the Divine Presence through tefillah, the study of Torah, and the engagement with our community. But we cannot turn to any of these three spheres in a utilitarian way – to gain knowledge, to get our requests answered, to access services. We need to approach these spaces in Jewish life with the purpose of getting in touch with G-d’s presence – unmediated arenas of potential *devekut* – communion – with G-d.

And the Book of Job takes this notion a bit further. Job dwells in the universe of doubt. In this book, G-d has a showdown with Satan and Satan seeks to push Job to his limit, to see if he will curse G-d if he is punished mightily enough. At first, Job responds to his misfortune with amazing equanimity and faith:

“Hashem natan hashem lakach, yehi shem Hashem mevorach”

Job’s friends enter the picture and try to reassure Job that all that has befallen him is part of G-d’s plan; they seek to remind him of the ultimate truth of G-d’s system of justice, even if it might make no sense to Job himself.

And so little by little, Job’s deep confrontation with doubt emerges, and it feels very real, very human.

7:11- "On my part, I will not speak with restraint; I will give voice to the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul"

9:17 – "He wounds me for no cause"

He responds as I would probably respond. Anyone of us who has dealt with the illness of one of our children knows this pain – how unexplained suffering can force you to reexamine all the theological tenets that you so blithely accepted before life challenged them. Job's personal pain pushes him to question G-d's existence and nature:

10:4 – Do you have eyes of flesh? Is your vision that of mere men? Are your days the days of a mortal?

23:8 – "If I go East, He is not there. West – I still do not perceive him. North – since He is concealed, I do not behold him; South – He is hidden and I cannot see him."

Job questions and argues and arrives at a place of real doubt. We don't read this book on any chag, it lies at the end of Ketuvim, its origin and author are not clear, but it is here nonetheless. It was included in Tanach, and this exploration of doubt is part of our canon. It was included, perhaps, because it speaks to us all, in an honest and unflinching manner, on the basic questions of existence and the genuine moments of doubt that we will face, if we do not look away when it comes creeping in.

So how does Job deal with doubt? After 37 chapters of debate and arguing, chapters of intellectual and philosophical wrangling about G-d, Job has a moment of contact with G-d.

God addresses Job from the "se'ara" – from within a whirlwind. G-d's voice and presence issue forth from a swirling tempest, and Job listens. G-d does not address any of Job's questions on justice and providence; he merely speaks of the wonders and marvels of the world and of His own supremacy. And finally, Job answers G-d:

42:5 – I had heard you with my ears; But now I see you with my eyes"

Up until that point, G-d and G-d's nature were an intellectual abstraction, something about which Job could discuss and debate. But confronted by the unmediated awesomeness of G-d's presence, there was a lifting of the veil, a shift from an I-It encounter to an I-Thou encounter, to borrow Buber's language. Now, Job's doubt did not carry the same intensity or the same import for him. I don't think that it magically disappeared; I believe that it was now refracted through a new lens.

I am not saying nor do I believe that all true doubts can be erased by a powerful experience in which G-d is felt. Doubt is real and heavy. But I do accept that in encounters with doubt, there is immense power in stepping away from the intellect and turning to the affective, the felt relational contact with G-d and the world. As Rabbi Lamm suggests, you might access those "se'ara" moments within tefillah, while immersed in Torah study and through communal engagement, or you might not. Those avenues might not do it for you. For some, G-d might be found through music, meditation, yoga, dancing, hiking in the mountains – not as replacements for halachic practice, but as supplements. In my reading, Job comes to show us the truth and validity of doubt, AND how one might transform it into a tool towards new understanding.

One more thought on this topic. Several weeks ago, I encountered two unrelated texts that seemed to be conversing with one another. The first is the writings and teachings of Matthieu Ricard. The son of an eminent French philosopher, he began his adult life with a promising career in science. But just as he ascending the academic ladder at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, Ricard decided to give it all up. He moved to Nepal, and immersed himself in the world of Tibetan Buddhism, eventually becoming a Buddhist master. In discussing his reasons for this abrupt life change, he says, in his book "The Monk and the Philosopher," that he went to see a documentary on several great Tibetan Buddhist teachers. At the time, he knew nothing about Buddhism and was not drawn to it because of its intellectual or philosophical merits. He writes:

"I had the impression of seeing living beings who were the very image of what they taught. They had such a striking and remarkable feeling about them. I couldn't quite hit on the explicit reasons why, but what struck me most was that they matched the ideal of sainthood, the perfect being, the sage...here were beings who seemed to be living examples of wisdom." (p. 5)

In a later interview, Ricard spoke about these Buddhist masters and returned again and again to their beauty and attraction – they were total embodiments of their beliefs and teachings. They lived their lives with consistency and coherence, and to Ricard, that was wisdom, that was beauty, that was the existence to which he aspired.

Parker Palmer, the educator, author and activist, speaks of the same goal. He writes in his book [A Hidden Wholeness](#):

“We arrive in this world undivided, integral, whole. But sooner or later, we erect a wall between our inner and outer lives, trying to protect what is within us or to deceive the people around us. Only when the pain of our dividedness becomes more than we can bear do most of us embark on an inner journey toward living “divided no more.”

Palmer recognizes the value, like Ricard, of striving for a coherent, undivided life, a life in which our actions and choices, internal and external, are consistent with our beliefs and values. A life that is not fractured and rife with inconsistency.

What does this have to do with doubt?

Doubt is often maligned as such an inconsistency, a element that comes in and fractures a neatly ordered system, which is why Jewish doubt has traditionally been shunned and not tolerated. But I believe that Job comes to teach us something different. At the very end of G-d’s exchange with Job, G-d turns to Job’s friend Eliphaz and says:

“I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did my servant Job”

In spite of Job’s moments of intense questioning, struggle and doubt – or maybe precisely because of them – G-d praises Job. His struggle was real and genuine, and this is the truth to which G-d refers – the truth of a life focused on seeking faith and meaning, filled – as it might be – with potholes and obstacles.

Substantive doubt can coexist with faith and practice in a coherent life. If doubt is acknowledged as a healthy and genuine part of the struggle for meaning, it can be elevated and used as an instrument – an instrument that can refine and purify ideas that have been left unexamined. It can be a tool for seeking out G-d’s presence in conventional and unconventional spaces. It can guide us in our search for purified coherence.

Shabbat Shalom.