

## **A Meditation on Emunah**

Last Shabbat was the winter equinox, the shortest day of the year, the time when the earth is the furthest away from the sun. It is a time of the year when humans throughout the ages hope and pray there is a God who cares about us, that would bring back the sun, and allow us continue to live on this cold planet. In short, it is the season where faith becomes an issue of life and death.

In last week's parasha, Shemot, Moses sees a burning bush, and notices that it is not being consumed. This catches his attention. He perceives that there is something outside of the natural laws happening in front of him. Out of that burning bush, he hears God's voice and begins a dialogue with the Almighty.

Today's parasha, Va'era, begins with a statement from God saying that He is using His name yod kay vov kay with Moses for the first time. Before this, the Torah tells us in Shemot 6:3, He always appeared to our patriarchs with the name El Shaddai. This is somewhat strange because we have many examples of Adonai talking to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the name of the tetragrammaton. From Rashi, we learn that there is a midrashic point being made here. Abraham's genius and the thing that set him apart from all who came before him, is that he perceived God, and began a dialogue with Him, without the need for any supernatural attention getting devices. The God of Abraham was El Shaddai, usually translates as God Almighty, but also might be translated as the God that is enough. Di. There was no need for fireworks, like a burning bush, to get Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob's attention. The patriarchs were already inclined to hear God's voice. My kids might say, that was their superpower. Moses, though he was the

greatest of our prophets, is a rung below Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in his ability to perceive God in the world.

Rav Soloveitchik in his book *Lonely Man of Faith* tells us that in Genesis there are two stories of the creation of Man and Woman. While some believe that this indicates that there were various traditions woven together in a single text, Rav Soloveitchik makes a convincing case that the two stories are deliberate. They describe two types of Men that were created. In the first story, Man and Woman were created together, and they were given the mission to *pru u'vu*, and to subdue the earth making it their dominion. This Adam "ha'rishon" was given the task to use his God-like creative powers to rule the world with his companion, Woman. In the second story, Man is created alone, from the dust of the earth, and G-d animates the dust by blowing his *nefesh*, his soul, into his nostrils. Adam "ha'sheni" is created as a companion for God, and only later is Woman created from Man, to join as an additional companion for God. This second Adam is meant as a counterpoint to the first. Where the first Adam is too busy creating, subduing, and ruling the world to notice God, the second Adam is in constant conversation with God, living according to His will, and finding meaning through acting in accordance with God's commands. As they say, it takes all types. But most of us are not all one or the other, we mostly have a little of each mixed in all of us.

I have noticed that regarding faith, people generally fall into one of three camps. There is a group of people who are believers. These folks know that there is a God, and have no trouble seeing Him in all things, and are comfortable conversing with Him. These *bene Avraham* are a rare breed today. Picture *Tevye der Milkhiker*, from *Fiddler on the Roof*, who carried on a

constant dialogue with God, or Abraham Joshua Heschel who was in a constant state of radical amazement.

Most of us are really agnostic. We don't live every moment with the knowledge of God's presence, and we even find ourselves doubting His existence altogether at times, but when we hear a piece of beautiful music; look at a majestic mountain or a tiny bud of a flower; stand in front of a work of architecture by Mies Van der Rohe or Frank Lloyd Wright, and we weep inside, knowing we are witnessing something divinely inspired. When we attend the birth of our child, experience the healing power of prayer, witness the death of a parent, or perform the mitzvah of tahara, we know we know there is a G-d. Then we go back to our regular lives, worried about deadlines and carpools and dinner and traffic, and forget the transformative experience. My son said to me the other day, "but you can never prove that God exists." He is, of course correct, but his insight is irrelevant. In the presence of witnessing God's work, doubting His existence is as foolish as questioning the existence of magnetism, or gravity, or even better, the existence of love.

Then there are the atheists. To me, to be a real atheist is the most demanding and rarest of the three. You have to earn the right to be an atheist. It isn't enough to say that you don't believe in God. Any agnostic can do that. To be a true atheist, you must have an alternative theory on everything. If there is no God, then how did we get here? To answer this question, you must learn all of the ways of God, all of His laws of nature, physics, mathematics, cosmology, biology, in order to say that it all happened randomly over a very long period of time. In many ways, a committed atheist is the most consumed by radical amazement. While an agnostic simply shrugs at the mysteries of the universe and goes back to work, an atheist is obsessed with the

way God created the universe. This is pure Adam ha'rishon. To create like God, we need to understand God's ways, and imitate them. Launching a rocket, curing a disease, developing telecommunications networks and hardware all require a reverence for the laws of nature, but not necessarily a respect for the Creator of those laws.

In today's parasha, Pharaoh doesn't know yod kay vov kay, though he knows the laws of nature and what is possible within those laws. He has magicians who can use these laws to create like God. How familiar does this sound? Like a New York cab driver who has seen everything, and is impressed with nothing, Pharaoh sees Moses' proofs that he has been sent by God to free the Jews as nothing more than fancy technology, nothing more than parlor tricks. How many of us, when faced with a miracle of nature immediately try to explain how it could happen, convincing ourselves that anyone could do that, not seeing the power and life force behind the miracle of creation. We tend to mistake our ability to manipulate the laws of nature with the divinity of the creator of those laws. We hold the manipulators up to high esteem rather than the One who gave us the power of manipulation. When Joseph is asked by Pharaoh to interpret his dream, Joseph answers that he will only use the abilities given to him by God to accomplish this feat, thereby recognizing God, and not his own talents, behind his ability. Joseph was an Adam ha'sheni.

So what does it mean to be an Adam ha'sheni today? According to the Rav, it means to be in constant dialogue among God, yourself and Thou, that is, others. It means that when we daven, we are talking to God, directly, not metaphorically, as we would talk to our closest friend. And what are we talking to God about? In the recognition of the Oneness of Hashem, we are praying for the well-being of everyone and everything. We are not focused on our own welfare. When

we hear of someone like this, someone who is truly selfless, someone who acts in accordance with the oneness of all, we are in awe, and hold them in high esteem. They are our heroes. When we are in the presence of Adam ha'sheni, we instinctively know it. It makes us better people just to think about them, and even better to emulate them.

So where do we go from here? While we are caught up in our busy lives, losing the radical amazement of a Heschel, we need to take the opportunities we can find to talk to God, directly as a companion, to see others as ourselves, to pray for and work for their welfare and well being, and to be less concerned about our own material success. We need to recognize the godliness of the pursuits of others, even if they don't see it themselves. We need to recognize real leadership and support examples of great men and women wherever they are found. I am tremendously proud of my wife's work teaching English as a Second Language to newly arrived refugees from war torn countries. When we are in shul, we should use the time not just to speed through the liturgy to get to Kiddush or to show off our proficiency, but to become comfortable with the Jewish language of relationship we have been given by our ancestors, and actually have a conversation with God.

Shabbat Shalom.