

Reconciling ourselves with the world

ממעמקים קראתיך ה'

א-דני שמעה בקולי

From the depths I call to you, God!

God, hear my voice!¹

Once upon a time, two farmers were arguing over a bag of 100 gold coins. "I found it, so it is mine!" one of them declared. "But it was found in my field, so it is mine!" the other insisted. Neighbors gathered around. Voices were raised. But the dispute seemed insoluble. Finally, the crowd spied a stranger, a traveler, passing by on the road. They ran to him. "Can you resolve a disagreement for us?" The stranger agreed to try. He listened to the story of each farmer in turn. When they had finished, he asked, "Do you really want me to decide this?" They agreed that they did. Then he asked, "Do you want me to decide it by the law of earth or by the law of heaven?" The farmers looked at each other. "By the law of heaven, of course!" said one. "Yes, the law of heaven will surely be the best." "You're sure?" the stranger asked. "Yes, yes!" they both cried. "Very well," said the stranger. He closed his eyes, took 80 of the coins and gave them at random to one farmer, leaving 20 coins for the other. "What is this?" one of the farmers asked angrily. "What kind of crazy judgment have you given us?" "You just distributed the coins at random!" fumed the other. "That's not the kind of decision we had in mind!" The stranger opened his eyes and replied, "You said you wanted me to decide according to the law of heaven, didn't you? Well, look around. Some people are born rich and others poor. Some are born blind and others can see. Some are born lame and others can run. That is the law of heaven."²

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die. Who shall suffer and who shall prosper. Who shall hunger and who shall thirst. But these sentences, these fates have already been written on our bodies and on our hearts during the past year. We have seen life and death, suffering and prosperity, hunger and thirst. And we have seen more than that. We have seen good people die young while evil lives on. We have seen those who care only about themselves grow rich while those who devote themselves to others starve. We have seen those who happen to be born at a particular time and in a particular place undergo agonies of privation, while others who happen to be born elsewhere enjoy abundance.

¹ Psalm 130:1-2.

² This story can be found in משלים פילוסופיים לילדים (Philosophical Parables for Children) by Michel Piquemal (2006). It was originally published in French as Les Philo-Febles and was translated into Hebrew by Reuven Miran. What appears here is my translation and adaptation of the Hebrew version of the story.

We have seen the law of heaven, we have seen the world as it is, and it has sometimes driven us to despair.

Rosh Hashanah is called Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. We could also call it the Day of Measuring Up. On Rosh Hashanah, we are called upon to face the world, the world as it is, a world full of what is missing. We look inside our own souls, and we see how far we have fallen short of the standards that God and other people and we ourselves have set for us. We look at our community, and we see all the ways in which it is not the welcoming, supportive, warm, and loving environment that it should be. We look at our world, and we see all the ways in which it is broken, its courts unjust, its structure oppressive, its playing field slanted, its rich all-powerful, its poor ignored, its violence praised, its peacemakers silenced, its deaths unexplained, its lives unappreciated. We, and our community, and our world have not measured up, not measured up to our expectations, not measured up to our friends and neighbors expectations, and not measured up to God's expectations for us. In the words of our prayer book we say:

What are we? What is our life? What is our piety? What is our righteousness? What is our attainment, our power, our might? What can we say, Lord our God and God of our ancestors? To you, all the mighty are nothing, the famous nonexistent, the wise lacking in wisdom, the clever lacking reason. For all of their actions are meaningless, the days of their lives emptiness. There is no difference between humans and beasts, for all is futility.³

Facing Rosh Hashanah, Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, can drive some of us to hopelessness. We may have seen those we love die too soon or in pain. We may have watched as our expectations for our own lives or for the lives of our children or friends have been shattered. We may have felt our community wrenched by violence beyond reason. We may have experienced disease or accident curtailing our ability to act and live as we choose, or doing so to those with whom we are close. And we may have wondered: Why? What reason could be behind any of this? How could the world operate in this way? Are there any answers?

One of the greatest of the Talmudic rabbis, Rabbi Elisha ben Avuyah, became a heretic. Why?

It is said that once, while sitting and studying in the valley of Gennesar, he saw a man climb to the top of a palm tree, take the mother bird [from a nest] with the young [which the Torah prohibits], and descend in safety. The next day, he saw another man climb to the top of the same palm tree and take the young [from

³ From Birchot HaShachar (the Morning Prayers), said daily.

the nest], but let the mother go free [as the Torah commands]; as he descended, a snake bit him and he died. Elisha exclaimed: It is written [Deuteronomy 22:7] “Let the mother go and take only the young, that you may fare well and have a long life.” Where is the well-being of this man, and where is the prolonging of his life?⁴

In some versions of the story, Elisha immediately declared, “אין דין ואין דיין” – “There is no justice and there is no Judge.” Faced with the paradox of someone dying after doing precisely the action that the Torah promises will result in long life, Elisha declared that there was no meaning and no understanding, no logic to the human experience, and certainly no Judge who could sit in judgment. And some of us have been there, crying out in our pain, אין דין ואין דיין!

Jewish tradition does not leave us there, in that place of meaninglessness. Instead, it calls upon us to do the hard work of reconciling ourselves to this world, the world as it is, and once again finding meaning in it, somehow. We see this in the rituals of mourning, at the most painful moment of parting, as the body of the one we love is lowered into the ground and the reality of death is at its sharpest. At this hard, hard moment, mourners are required to say the Mourner’s Kaddish. As I teach again and again, the Mourner’s Kaddish does not refer to death at all. It is a praise song to God for the gift of life. Its words glorify God and ask, if they ask anything at all, for God to continue to spread Divine glory through the world, speedily and in our time. It is difficult to say any words at that most painful moment of parting; all words seem inadequate in the face of loss that cuts so deep. But to say these words? To praise and thank God for the gift of life? Surely that is going too far. I think, though, that this traditional practice is trying to pull us back from the brink. Just when we, at graveside, are ready to declare life meaningless, the tradition places in front of us the most difficult of tasks: to find meaning again, to wrestle with the world in all of its pain and darkness and to find some light again.

The same thing happens to us after Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah it is written. And on Yom Kippur it is sealed. After facing Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, we are not left there to despair. We enter the 10 Days of Repentance, days of struggle to forge meaning out of the hardest truths about ourselves, our communities, and our world. We are given time, time before our judgment for the coming year is sealed into the Book of Life. In that time we can apologize and we can forgive. We can meditate and we can resolve. Yet today, right now, that time has elapsed. We are at the moment just before Yizkor, before we remember what for some of us are the most confidence-shaking, despair-provoking times of our lives. How are we to continue? How can we

⁴ Jerusalem Talmud Tractate Hagigah 9b, translation mine.

wrest meaning from the depths of our cries, even now, even after all that has happened and all that we have faced?

First, we must understand that struggling against despair – despair for ourselves, for those around us, for the world – is just what we should be doing on this day. Despair threatens to empty our lives of meaning, and we must not let it. Our sages taught again and again that despair comes from the *Yetzer HaRa*, the Evil Inclination, what the Hasidim call the *Sitra Achra*, the Other Side. It is only destructive. It holds no redemptive force for us; instead it blocks us from redemption. To admit it into our souls is to give up our ability to live. I began this morning with the words of Psalm 130, “From the depths I call to you, God! God, hear my voice!” The Psalmist continues, “אם עונות י-ה יעמד?” – If you kept account of sins, God, who could survive?” If we kept account of all that we have done that has not lived up to our expectations of ourselves, to others’ expectations of us, and to God’s expectations of us, how could we survive? And if we kept account of all the ways in which our community has failed us and failed others, could it survive? And if we kept account, a strict accounting, of all the brokenness of the world, of all the ways it has failed us and we have failed it, could the world survive? We need a way to move forward. We need a way to reconcile with ourselves, to reconcile with our community, and to reconcile with this world full of flaws.

I want to suggest one way, an idea that we might try this year. It is not easy. It requires effort, a certain suspension of disbelief, and something of a leap of faith. But I think it is worth trying. It begins from the teaching of Rebbe Nahman of Breslov that within each human being, there is a *מעט טוב* – a tiny piece of goodness.⁵ Rebbe Nahman was a person who struggled with despair, with his knowledge of all that was broken in his world and in himself. Yet he was also the person who taught that one must never despair, despite it all. Rebbe Nahman asked us, implored us, to search deep within each human being to find a *מעט טוב* – a tiny piece of goodness that we can identify and hold. He taught that this is always possible, even in a person who seems completely wicked. That person, too, contains a *מעט טוב* that can be identified and held up. For Rebbe Nahman, that little piece of goodness is the beginning of our redemption. From that tiny piece, we can build a bridge, a narrow bridge that will allow us to walk forward without fear, despite all that we know and all the ways in which our hearts have been broken. From that flickering spark, we can build a flame that can light our way. But first we have to find it.

So I want to ask you, right now, to start to build that bridge for yourself. We always have to start with ourselves. Close your eyes if you’re comfortable doing so; that

⁵ This is part of Rebbe Nahman’s teaching known as Azamra. The full teaching can be found here: <http://www.azamra.org/sing.shtml>

will make it easier to think. Look inside yourself. Imagine entering into your own soul. What do you see? Step lightly past the regrets and the guilt. Brush away the sins and the disappointments, move through the darkness and the pain. See it, glimmering in the distance? Go closer. It is there, shining weakly in the dark, your **מַעַט טוֹב**, the tiny piece of goodness that is inside of you. It may be a moment in which you comforted a friend. It could be a gift you gave to a stranger, a lesson you taught a child, an instant when you stood up for justice. Any of these could create this spark of light inside you. Hold it in your hands. Breathe on it to make it glow. This is the building block of the bridge to bring you back to yourself, a bridge over despair. This is the light that will guide you on your way.

Now, in your mind's eye, look around you. See the other people who surround you in this room, in this community. Look past their physical presences. Look at their souls. Ignore the missteps, the moments of inattention, their times of not measuring up. Instead, look for the light. Where is their **מַעַט טוֹב**? When have you seen their spark shining through? It may have been a greeting on a difficult day. It may have been a phone call when you needed to hear from someone. It may have been a random moment of kindness. Find it. Hold it. Lift it up. This is the building block of the bridge to bring you back to your community, and this is the light that will guide you on your way.

Now, still in your mind's eye, look over the world. Skip gently over its wars and violence, its poverty and misery, its darkness and pain. Look for the glimmers of light. We know they are there. We hear about them sometimes. People helping others whom they barely know, for reasons they can't really explain. People speaking up for justice for others, even though they live a world away. People devoting themselves to pushing forward a vision of the future, even though they themselves will never see it or benefit from it. People loving each other, and giving to each other, even though it goes against their own self-interest. This is the **מַעַט טוֹב** in the world. These are the glimmers of light, the sparks in the night. These are the building blocks of the bridge to bring us back to our world, and these are the lights that will guide us on our way.

Now, if you'd like, you can open your eyes. It will take more than just recognizing these sparks and the building blocks that can lead us to a world of meaning rather than a world of despair. Meaning, fairness, justice, peace – these are ours to build, and there is so much work to do. But like God creating the world, we are not starting from nothing. When we recognize the **מַעַט טוֹב**, the tiny pieces of goodness in ourselves, in those around us, and in the world, we see that we have a framework that supports us, a scaffolding around us from which we can build higher. We also see that the project of creating a world of meaning did not start with us and will not finish with us. It is a project that we inherit from those who came before us and pass on to those who will come after us. We are part of a long chain of humanity searching for and

finding meaning, and that work will go on long past the span of our individual lives. This realization, too, is a bulwark against despair. We stand on the shoulders of generations of strivers. And we reach out our arms to the generations yet to come. We, like them, look directly at the injustice and unfairness of the world, the law of heaven that distributes fortune and misfortune, wealth and poverty, health and disease at random. And we draw on the *טוב מעט* that we see in every person, in every community, and throughout the world to transform what is into what could be. We stand on the ground and reach toward the stars. This is our law and our meaning. This is the law of earth.

The farmers were outraged at the stranger's judgment, despite his explanations about the law of heaven. "What about fairness?" shouted one farmer. "What about justice?" screamed the other. The stranger smiled sadly. "Fairness? Justice? Those are up to us. That is the law of earth. Seek it out, my friends, for that is the law by which a person can truly live." So saying, he picked up his walking stick and traveled on, into the waiting world.

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