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Resilience and Repentance

The Thread
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Something is very gently, invisibly, silently,
pulling at me—a thread or net of threads
finer than cobweb and as elastic. I haven't tried
the strength of it. No barbed hook
pierced and tore me. Was it not long ago this thread
began to draw me? Or way back?
Was I born with its knot about my neck, a bridle? Not fear
but a stirring of wonder makes me catch my breath when I feel
the tug of it when I thought
it had loosened itself and gone.

Is there any hope? Or have we gone too far down the wrong road, for ourselves, for our society, for our planet, as selfishness runs rampant, truth is under attack, justice is elusive, violence and racism rage, and the cataclysmic effects of climate change drown our coasts and darken our skies with smoke? Even if we can agree that the free will to choose between good and evil is part of the essential character of the human being, is there a limit, a point of no return beyond which we no longer have the choice, shaped too deeply by what we have already chosen, for good or for ill? To use the metaphor of Levertov's poem, is the thread elastic enough to stretch, to pull at us no matter how far away we may go? Or is there a certain point at which the thread snaps, our connection is broken, and there is no way back, our cause hopeless, our only option despair?

The first human beings exercise their power of choice to disobey God, eating from the tree of the knowledge, which paves the way to a greater range of choices than perhaps God had planned for. When considering whether or not to eat the fruit, urged on by the crafty serpent, Eve noticed that "the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom."[1] That is what motivates her to eat and to give some to her husband to eat as well. This can be seen as a "just so" story about the nature of humanity: humans are curious, think for themselves, and weigh the costs and benefits when deciding whether to follow or violate a rule, even one given to them by an all-powerful Creator. While some religious traditions see in this story evidence of an "original sin" in which all humans partake, leading them to teach that all people are born sinful, Jewish sources tend to treat this story as neither tragic nor unforeseen. Note that while God banishes Adam and Eve from Eden, their "curse" is simply the lot of humans: to till the soil by the sweat of our brows and to bring children into the world with great pain as well as great joy. And God never considers revoking the power of moral choice that apparently was given to humans alone of all

[1] Genesis 3:6.

creatures that God created.[2] Neither does God seem to view these disobedient creations as irredeemable, given that God does not destroy them and in fact allows them to continue to live and to make choices, both good and bad.[3]

Of course, when one of Adam and Eve's sons kills the other, the devastating consequences of the power of choice become immediately evident. Yet it is here in the story of Cain and Abel that ancient rabbinic tradition finds one of its enduring metaphors for the constitution of the human being as composed of a combination of *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra,* usually but inaccurately translated as the "good inclination" and "evil inclination." This comes from the moment when God warns Cain, "If you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master."[4] As the rabbis explain, *yetzer ha-tov* is the inclination toward others, while *yetzer ha-ra* is the inclination toward the self, and both of these are necessary elements of the human soul. In fact, when God declared that the sixth day, the day on which humanity was created, was "very good,"[5] God was referring to the combination of these "selfless" and "selfish" inclinations; only when both of those had been created in humanity on the sixth day was that day alone among all the days of creation "very good."[6]

In a Talmudic story to which I often refer, the rabbis decide to capture and imprison the selfish inclination in order to rid it from the world. They call a fast of three days, and the *yetzer ha-ra* surrenders to them. But they are warned that if they kill it, the world is doomed. Doubtful, they imprison it for three days, and then go searching for a fresh egg, a sign that the world is functioning. When they can't find even a single one, they are forced to let the selfish inclination go back out into the world.[7] The *yetzer ha-ra* is such an important part of humanity that to destroy it would destroy human life entirely. If this is so, then what is the difference between Abel, who lived peacefully with his brother, and Cain, who killed his? It is not the presence of the selfish inclination in Cain that makes the difference; that is in all of us. It is the moment when he allows it to overwhelm his selfless inclination that leads him to sin in this horrible way. Cain is just like us; his actions speak to the potential within us all. We all need to devote constant attention to keeping the selfish and selfless inclinations in balance.

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[2] Although animals undoubtedly have the power to make choices of a certain kind, Jewish tradition has usually seen these as not falling into a moral framework in which those choices can be dubbed good or evil. As a result, although an unpredictably dangerous animal may be killed to prevent harm to humans (Exodus 21:28), the habitual actions of animals are usually judged to be the responsibility of those human beings charged with caring for them, as in the famous case of the repeatedly goring ox (Exodus 21:29).

[3] As we know, human beings will make more bad choices than good fairly quickly, leading to the world being filled with violence at the time of Noah (Genesis 6:11).

[4] Genesis 4:7.

[5] Genesis 1:31.

[6] See Bereishit Rabbah 9:7: "Rabbi Nahman said in Rabbi Samuel's name: 'Behold, it was good' refers to the Good Desire; 'And behold, it was very good' refers to the Evil Desire. Can then the Evil Desire be very good? That would be extraordinary! Without the Evil Desire, however, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children; and thus said Solomon: 'Again, I considered all labor and all excelling in work, that it is a man's rivalry with his neighbor' (Ecclesiastes 4:4)."

[7] Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b.

You might expect that the aftermath of this fratricide, the first murder in the Torah, would be a scene of harsh punishment. Cain, the argument could go, has brought evil into the world, and God must make an example of him and extinguish him from the earth! Yet that is not what happens. Yes, there is a punishment, as God decrees,

> Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground! Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened up its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on the earth.[8]

But when Cain complains that his punishment is too harsh and that it leaves him in danger, God, amazingly, listens sympathetically. "'I promise,'" God declares, "'if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on him.' And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him."[9] This is hardly the reaction of the divine to someone irretrievably lost. Instead it is a classic example of the rabbinic dictum that one should "always push away with the left hand and draw close with the right hand."[10] God decries Cain's sin and punishes him, but at the same time God creates an unbreakable bond with him and protects him. Even one who has murdered his brother seems to have an enduring connection with God.

The ultimate villain of the Torah, of course, is Pharaoh, the seemingly all-powerful ruler of Egypt who enslaves the Israelites and refuses to let them go, even when plague after plague lashes his land and when even his counselors can see that the hand of God is raised against them.[11] Why does Pharaoh continue to defy God, even when he has promised Moses that if this latest plague is lifted, he will, at long last, let the people go? The answer is right there in the Torah: after each of the first few plagues, Pharaoh "stiffens" or "hardens" his heart and does not make good on his word. Then, at a certain point, things change. As many commentators have noticed, after the sixth plague, the plague of boils, it no longer says that Pharaoh hardened his heart against the Israelites. Here, instead, "the Lord stiffened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not heed them."[12] This transition seems purposeful. Pharaoh has demonstrated his defiance of God in the face of his people's suffering, his advisors' pleas, and the evidence of his own eyes about the damage the plagues are wreaking on Egypt. At this point, it seems, God is no longer giving Pharaoh the choice; unlike with Adam and Eve or even with Cain, God seems to have taken the power of free will from Pharaoh and is forcing him to continue to act the part of the despot no matter how much his heart might quake within him. On the surface, the message here seems to be that yes, there is always the possibility of

[8] Genesis 4:10-12.
[9] Genesis 4:15.
[10] Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 107b. Interestingly, one of the negative examples given there is of Yehoshua ben Perachya, "who pushed away Jesus the Nazarene with two hands." The Talmud goes on to narrate that Yehoshua was Jesus's teacher, and when Jesus sinned one day, Yehoshua refused to accept his repentance, thus leading Jesus to leave the rabbinic community and go in the direction of sin (from the Talmud's point of view).
[11] See Exodus 8:15.
[12] Exodus 9:12.

redemption—except in this case, the exception that proves the rule. As the famous rabbinic heretic Elisha ben Avuyah hears the divine voice whispering, "Return to Me, my children—except you!"[13]

The ancient rabbis, however, are not satisfied with this picture of Pharaoh as a hopeless case, the one sinner who can never be forgiven, proof positive of the limits of repentance and forgiveness. Rabbi Nehemiah makes the case that, despite the fact that the Torah records that all of Pharaoh's army drowned in the sea and even specifies that "not one of them remained,"[14] Pharaoh did not die in the waters.[15] With some grammatical justification, Rabbi Nehemiah re-reads that verse as "none remained except one," and argues that that one was Pharaoh. He quotes an earlier part of the Torah where God says to Pharaoh, "Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that My fame may resound throughout the world."[16] How could that happen if Pharaoh died in the sea??

An early medieval source expands on this, arguing that not only did Pharaoh survive, he also repented!

> Rabbi Nehunya ben Ha-Kanah says: Observe the power of repentance. Learn from the example of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who rebelled exceedingly against the Supreme Rock, as it is written, "Who is the Lord that I should heed God?" (Exodus 5:2). Using the same expression with which he sinned, so did he repent, as it is written, "Who is like You, O Lord, among the celestials" (Exodus 15:11), and thus the Holy Blessed One delivered him from among those who were dying… He went and became king of Nineveh…and when the Holy Blessed One sent Jonah to bring to the city prophecy of its destruction, Pharaoh heard, arose from his throne, rent his garments and put on sackcloth and ashes, and he declared that all his people should fast with him for three days.[17]

As Maimonides later teaches, what constitutes true repentance? When one is faced with the same situation in which one sinned, but this time, one does NOT sin.[18] Pharaoh knew all about defiance. He had built his kingdom and his life on the premise that he was both all-powerful and infallible, and he suffered defeat because of it. Yet when, through God's mercy, he ends up with a chance to do it all again, he chooses a different path. He, even he, has enough insight to recognize his mistakes and turn from them, and instead of leading his people into destruction as he did in Egypt, he leads the people of Nineveh into a posture of humility and self-reflection that saves them from God's wrath and makes them the poster children for the efficacy of repentance, whose story we read for inspiration every year, as we will tomorrow afternoon.

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[13] Jerusalem Talmud Hagigah 2:1.
[14] Exodus 14:28.
[15] See Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate *de-Va-yehi*, Chapter 6.
[16] Exodus 9:16.
[17] Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 43.
[18] Laws of Repentance 2:1, based on Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b.

These rabbinic sources, like the early Biblical narratives, point us in the direction of hope, but hope of a very particular kind. The reason return and repentance are still possible, no matter how grossly we have strayed from our true path, is that our connection to the divine is in fact infinitely elastic, moving with us no matter how far down the wrong road we have travelled. There is a lot of talk these days about teaching our children resilience, and we have all had a master class in resilience over these past six months. Resilience is about the ability to do wrong, to make mistakes, to suffer the consequences, AND to keep coming back and trying again. But we need that feeling of connection, that persistent thread tugging at us, to make it possible. Otherwise we will be tempted to give up, to declare that there is no point to the effort. We are too far gone, we will say. The world is too far gone. There is no hope of change, not in the next month or year or decade, not through reflection or apology or reconciliation, not through the next election or demonstration or organizing meeting, not alone and not together.

How do we feel that connection, feel the thread tugging at us? First, I think, as Levertov's poem suggests, we need to look inside ourselves, to do the hard work of introspection that is the purpose of this day of Yom Kippur. Our liturgy leads us to focus on the times we have done wrong, when we have lost the connection and, like Adam and Eve, talked ourselves into choosing the wrong path, or, like Cain, let our selfish inclination dominate our selfless one. There are certainly plenty of those times for all of us, and we will have ample opportunity to lay them out over the next 24 hours. But if we are interested in finding hope, I want to encourage us to think about those other moments, the moments when we have felt the connection, even in the hardest times, even when the thread is stretched thin. When have we been stressed and challenged, yet found the internal resources to respond to the challenge with integrity and with love? When have we encountered pain and injustice, and instead of retreating, listened to the "still small voice" within us, the one that Elijah hears after the chaos of wind and earthquake and fire has passed?[19] It may have been a minute of comfort given to a parent or child, a loved one or friend. It may have been an instant of clarity that brought insight to a small group of neighbors or co-workers. It may have been an hour of gathering in public to speak out for what was right, in our community, our city, or our country. Or it may have been something else. Each of us, I'm convinced, can find these moments in our lives over the past year. And that is the evidence we need to focus on, the proof that despite all of the bad choices we may have made, we are capable of so much good, that the elastic thread still tugs at us, leading the way back to our highest selves.

Second, to feel the sense of connection even in those times when we can't find it in ourselves, we need to look to each other, to those around us. While we can often be blind to our own moments of clarity, it can be easier to see them in other people. Instead of being the source of invidious comparison to ourselves, we can be inspired by each other's sense of connection even when ours seems to be invisible. We have seen this through the past months of protests and demonstrations as inspiration passes between generations, elders being

[19] I Kings 19:11-13.

inspired by the passion of the young and the young being inspired by the vision and persistence of elders. We see it in our community, as each person who steps into a moment of leadership, whether in a meeting, a service, or a conversation, can inspire those who are gathered to experience that moment differently, finding their own connection because they see it in another. And we see it personally in our own lives, as an encounter with someone filled with hope and with faith in us can inspire us even when we have lost faith in ourselves. One of the things I return again and again to when I think about my father, *zichrono livrachah*, is his unshakeable faith in me, which he maintained steadfastly while my own waxed and waned. Even with him no longer in this world, the faith he showed in me sustains me still when mine wavers.

Third, to feel a sense of connection, we need to look at the history of the Jewish people. The oscillation between despair and hope in the face of a succession of terrible situations is perhaps the defining motif of Jewish history. The Israelites in Egypt have their spirits crushed by hard labor, and yet they are eventually able to muster enough hope to put blood on the doorposts of their houses, identifying themselves as Israelites and paving the way for their redemption. The Book of Lamentations, mourning the destruction of the Holy Temple, swings between helpless mourning and notes of hope that despite the horror and pain the people are experiencing, God has not completely abandoned them. The ancient rabbis living under Roman rule that deprives them of citizenship and most rights still manage to fill the thousands of pages of the Talmud with their dreams of the rule of law and the possibility of justice, despite the fact that they have no possibility of seeing those dreams fulfilled in their lifetimes. Our people have faced war and plague and destruction and genocide, and yes, we have sometimes understandably descended into despair and hopelessness. But the connecting thread, stretching but never breaking, has continued to tie us to each other, to our history and our future, and enabled us again and again to recapture our hope and begin the work of transforming the world anew.

Fourth, and maybe most important, we can look to recover our connection and feel the tug of the thread through our study of Torah. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, along with others, taught that despair is actually a trick of *yetzer ha-ra,* the selfish inclination, a trick designed to prevent us from allowing the selfless inclination, *yetzer ha-tov,* to hold sway over us. If nothing matters and all is hopeless, why should I bother to put myself out, to try to do good, to let my care for others take precedence over my care for myself? The idea that we are hopelessly evil and that the world is beyond repair is a recipe for inaction, apathy, and depression. Torah, as we saw earlier, puts the lie to that idea when it shows people who act badly but still stay in relationship with God.

The ancient rabbis imagined God saying, "'I created a selfish inclination, but I created the Torah as a remedy.'"[20] The whole point of Torah study is to get our focus off of ourselves and to direct it toward others, whether they be our family and our people or strangers who

[20] Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 30b.

have no history with us. Torah teaches that we have responsibilities toward others just by virtue of their humanity, and it details what those responsibilities might be, from preserving the lives of others to making sure they have food, clothing, and shelter and, maybe most crucially, that they are treated with kindness. Studying Torah involves grappling with the tensions when our responsibilities toward others conflict with what we owe ourselves, as in the phrase that culminates our Torah reading on Yom Kippur afternoon, "*V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocha* – love your neighbor as yourself,"[21] NOT more than yourself, NOT less than yourself, but in a way that creates balance between the two. Torah at its best teaches the same balance between *yetzer ha-ra* and *yetzer ha-tov,* between the selfish and selfless inclinations, that the ancients saw at the heart of what it means to be a *ben Adam*, a *mensch* – a human being.

The thread tugs at us when we find shining moments of strength and goodness inside ourselves, when we catch a glimpse of others acting according to their highest values. It pulls at us when we contemplate our history as a people that endures traumatic events and retains slivers of hope, and when we study the teachings of Torah that reveal the beauty of living a life of responsibility balanced between self and others. Our task on this night and through this day of Yom Kippur is to feel the tug, to catch the sense of wonder that hope is not gone, that the road does loop back, that we still have a choice. When we can feel that, then we have the ability to return, to do *t'shuvah*, turning and returning to ourselves, to our highest values, to the work of improving and renewing ourselves and our world. This year, of all years, let us be drawn by that thread, so very fine and so infinitely elastic. Let our hope show us the way.

G'mar hatimah tovah – may we all be sealed for good in the book of life that we write together this year.

[21] Leviticus 19:18.