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The Biggest Treasure Chest of All

Our tradition invites us into Rosh HaShanah by singing prayer poetry: *piyyutim*. We began on Selichot and we continue tonight, led by Nina Peskin and Rabbi Zeff, bathing in the melodies that for many of us open our hearts to the High Holiday season: to *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. We know that some parts of our soul are hard to reach through words or actions alone. When we seek *teshuvah*, when we seek to return to our true selves, music may carry us in a way that nothing else can.

One of the things we sang together last Saturday, and which we will continue to sing through the Days of Awe, before the open ark, is *E-I Raḥum v'Ḥanun*: God, Gracious and Compassionate. These words are from the Torah itself. They are the Thirteen Attributes of Divine mercy that Moses learns from God in the book of Exodus. It's a formula for seeking forgiveness, seeking compassion, patience, and love.

I imagine many of us are seeking this: forgiveness. Compassion. Patience. Love.

At the moment in the Torah when Moses is about to learn this formula, God tells him, "I will pass by you in my goodness. I will be gracious to whom I will show grace, and I will be compassionate to whom I show compassion." Ex. 33:19. It's a difficult passage to translate or to understand. What does it mean to show grace by being gracious, or to show compassion by being compassionate? The ancient rabbis attempt to make sense of it with a midrash: a story. As they imagined it, God was doing show and tell with Moses:

God showed Moses all the celestial treasure chests full of rewards to be bestowed upon the righteous, each in reward for certain acts. Moses pointed to one and asked: "Whose treasure is this?" "This is the treasure for those who give charity." And another: "Whose treasure is this?" "This is for those who raise orphans as their own children," God replied. "Whose treasure is this?" Moses queried. "This is the treasure for Torah scholars," God said. Then Moses pointed to the biggest treasure chest of all and asked: "Creator of the Universe, whose great treasure is this?" God said, "I reward those who have good deeds to their name. But for all those who

don't, I give freely from this treasure chest." As it says in the Torah: "I will be gracious to whom I show grace, and I will be compassionate to whom I show compassion." Ex. 33:19.¹

This year, right now, I'm holding onto this midrash. For all of us feeling tender as we enter the soul-searching of *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, for all of us who have made mistakes in the past year or even today, for all of us too humble to declare that we have done enough good deeds, our tradition holds in reserve for us "the biggest treasure chest of all."

This is a recalibration of some of the imagery we associate with Rosh HaShanah. This midrash does not teach us about God sitting in judgment: God deciding whether to inscribe our names in the Book of Life. Instead, this midrash offers us an image of God giving the biggest store of mercy to those who need it the most. For, well, most of us. For regular people.

I'm not sure exactly what the ancients pictured when they imagined "the biggest treasure chest of all." For me, the first thing that came to mind is something like a pirate's treasure chest, overflowing with shiny jewels. I tried Googling "overflowing treasure chest," and in every image, the treasure glows. It might seem cartoonish, but to me both the abundance and the luminosity of that image is what it might feel like to behold this gift.

The glow is the sliver of the new moon of Tishrei, peeking out right now, poised to swell into fullness on Sukkot. As the month continues, as the light grows, Sukkot contrasts the indoor contemplation of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur with a festival of the outdoors, a festival of harvest and leafy branches, meals shared under the sky, and the ethereal scent of the etrog.

The glow is the facets on the ruby seeds of a pomegranate, which we split open for the second day of Rosh HaShanah, symbolizing newness and Torah. When we eat a new fruit, it gives us the opportunity to say *Shecheyanu*: through tasting its sweetness, we can bless the very fact of being alive on this day.

The glow is the first light of the morning, when the natural world stirs and a new day unfurls. In the morning liturgy, we say, from Psalm 36: "*U'vtuvo m'hadesh b'chol yom tamid ma'aseh v'reishit*": In goodness, every day, continually, God renews the act of creation. As Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin teaches, "Rosh HaShanah is our annual celebration of that first and everlasting belief in goodness. On Rosh HaShanah we are reminded of the possibilities of eternal renewal; that the past is a launching pad for the future; that even though our past resides in us, we do not reside in it. As the world can be renewed, so can we."

¹ Shemot Rabbah 45:6; also Midrash Tanhuma Ki Tissa 27:10. I learned this midrash from Rabbi Leah Richman.

Tonight, I invite us to enter into the new year imagining in front of us “the biggest treasure chest of all,” a luminous, overflowing store of forgiveness, grace, compassion, patience, and love: gifts granted not because of our merits, but because of our humanity.

My prayer for us as a community is that we continue to envision the biggest treasure chest of all, and that we open ourselves to the possibility that this source of renewal is intended for us. That may come easily when we’re sitting here together, surrounded by the beloved people and sights and sounds of our sanctuary, glowing with its honey-colored wood and with the Torah scrolls robed in white and silver. I pray we can also envision this treasure as we go about the world, faced with the busyness and disappointments, the joys and the mundane aspects of daily life. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, z”l, wrote about the power of opening ourselves to this kind of perception in our daily lives: “Contemplate the wonders of creation, the divine dimension of their being, not as a dim configuration presented to you from a distance, but as the reality in which you live.”²

This year, in the reality in which we live, may we teach ourselves and each other that forgiveness, grace, compassion, patience and love are ours. That our Source and Creator gives them to us, freely and abundantly. And may receiving those gifts allow us to build our own storehouses, so we in turn can bestow them upon the people around us.

Shanah tovah!

² Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, Orot HaKodesh 1:4 (based on translation by R. Ben Zion Bokser).