

The lamp of God

Ner Adonai nishmat Adam

Hofes kol hadrei vaten

The soul of a human being is the lamp of God
Searching out all of the hidden places¹

When someone close to us dies, after the shock and the disbelief, after making the arrangements and notifying relatives and friends, after the funeral and the burial, we return home. We go home to sit shiva, entering the first, most intense phase of mourning. And our first act at home is to light a candle, the tall, shiva candle that burns for seven days and seven nights. At a time of devastating loss, after we have watched someone we love buried in the ground and the grave filled with earth, we perform a creative act to bring a little light into the world. As we kindle that light, we have the tradition that we say this verse from the Book of Proverbs, about the soul and the lamp and God and searching for what is hidden. But what does it mean? What comfort, what solace is hidden in these words? How can they help guide us on the path of mourning?

One of the teachings of the ancient rabbis in the Midrash interprets “the lamp of God” as being about divine protection, a protection offered to us because of the covenant between us and God. If we guard what is precious and unique to God, the Torah in our keeping that teaches us how to act in ways that give our lives meaning, then God will guard what is precious and unique to us, the soul that is in God’s keeping, when we wake and when we sleep, during our lives and after our deaths.

Rabbi Elazar HaKappar taught: The Holy Blessed One said to the human being, "Let My lamp be in your hand and your lamp be in Mine. 'My lamp in your hand,' as it says, 'For a *mitzvah* is a lamp and Torah is light' [Proverbs 6:23]. 'Your lamp in Mine,' as it says, 'The soul of a human being is the lamp of God' [Proverbs 20:27]. If you guard what is Mine, I will guard what is yours." Rabbi Hiya offered a parable: To what is this matter comparable? To two people who had vineyards, one [who lived] in the Galilee and one [who lived] in Judea. The one [who lived] in the Galilee had their vineyard in Judea and the one [who lived] in Judea had their vineyard in the Galilee. One day, one of them came to the other and said, "Guard my vineyard in the Galilee, and I will guard your vineyard in Judea. And if you lose my vineyard, I will lose your vineyard." So said the Holy Blessed One to Israel: "If you guard the Torah, I will guard you," as it says, "If you shall diligently keep all this commandment which I command you to do...then will the Lord...keep the covenant and mercy with those who love God and keep God’s commandments" [Deuteronomy 7:12].²

¹ Proverbs 20:27.

² Midrash Tehillim 17:7.

The Hasidic rebbe known as the S'fat Emet taught that each person has a piece of Torah that they guard, a teaching that they know in their souls and teach to others throughout their lives, an insight into the meaning of life that only they could bring into the world. So we are all entered into this mutual covenant of protection with God. We hold onto our Torah, which is a lamp, and guard it with all we have. And God holds onto our soul, which is a lamp, and guards it in this world and in the next.

The medieval rabbis are fascinated with this verse and interpret it in many different ways. Rashi, the earliest and most well-known of them all, from the 11th century, understands “the lamp of God” to be referring to the full journey of the soul, from its descent from before God to inhabit a human body, through its life in that body, and up to the moment we call death, when the soul returns to stand for judgment before God. Rashi dwells on the second half of the verse and the word *hofes*, “searching out,” and concludes that the soul operates as a witness when we stand before the heavenly court. He comments, “The soul that is within a person testifies about them at the moment of judgment.” In this reading, the soul is the part of us that forms a true record of our time on earth, not only everything we have done but also everything we have intended, every thought, every worthy or unworthy impulse that passed through us. Even what we may have long forgotten leaves a trace on our soul that can be discerned by the heavenly court. When someone dies, and we say the traditional phrase, *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*, Blessed is the True Judge, we are acknowledging that it is far beyond our human power to truly assess the impact and worth of a life. By sharing our memories, we try to get as close as we can to an understanding of the one we have lost, but we know that our perspective even on those we are closest to will always be incomplete. Only in the light of the heavenly court, when the soul can give a true accounting of a person’s entire life, and all the good and bad can be weighed with true knowledge and compassion, can there be true judgment. So we are taught to judge others favorably,³ and not to judge another until we have stood in their place.⁴ For only the soul knows the full truth, and only God can truly pass the final judgement.

Only a few decades later, Ibn Ezra takes his interpretation of this verse in a different direction. He sees “the lamp of God” referring to the brilliant, divine light that suffuses not only the soul but also all the parts of a human being. He writes:

Here the matter is [explained] by way of an allegory, for the soul is burning with divine light, and its resting place is in the head, and from there it shines into the spirit and the body in its wisdom, and they are lit up with its light. That is why it is called God’s light, as if God, using it, searches “the hidden places.” And the “places” are a hint toward the heart, which is the place of all thoughts.

In Ibn Ezra’s view, this verse is not addressing the heavenly court but the experience of human beings in our life on earth. We can sometimes ascribe holiness and light only to certain parts of

³ Pirkei Avot 1:6.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 2:4.

our lives, perhaps to those moments when we most transcend our earthly existence and touch something higher than the material world to which we are bound in this life. The mystics speak of four worlds—material, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—and we can often think the goal is to move as quickly as possible through the first three in order to arrive at the fourth, where holiness must be found. In Ibn Ezra’s vision, this verse is teaching us the opposite. All parts of our lives, from the most transporting to the most mundane, are suffused with divine light. They are all holy. When I sit with families who are recalling those they have lost, the moments they remember are often not those “peak experiences” that happen so rarely. Instead they recall the beauty of everyday times, of laughter and silliness, of mistakes and messes, as the places where they see traces of the love they have been blessed with. Ibn Ezra reminds us that the material and the mundane, the day-in day-out stuff of life, are also holy. Every moment has the potential to open up into divine light, as we live and as we remember.

The Ralbag, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, who lived a few centuries later than Rashi and Ibn Ezra, has a related, human-centered perspective on this verse. He sees “the lamp of God” as the means through which we can discover the truth of the secrets behind our existence. He writes:

To make clear who is truly the Sovereign [of the universe], it says that “the soul of a human being,” which is the mind, is “the lamp of God,” and it is “searching out all” of the depths of its existence to discover their secrets, as far as is possible with the help of God, from what will flow over the person from the divine light and brilliance. By that light will the person be able to discover the truth of those things that are the true object of reflection and meditation.

For Ralbag, every life and every mind holds divine secrets, hidden in the depths of our beings. Perhaps our job in this life is to search out these secrets, to plumb the mysteries of our existence, and to share our understandings. To that end, God has given us minds that have the potential to channel the divine light through which the truth of things can be seen. We can shine that light through all parts of ourselves, revealing the true shape of things.

When we mourn someone we have lost, we often go over, again and again, what we know of them, the things they said and the things they did, trying to understand the truth of them, the things we can hold onto and carry with us as we learn to live in a world without them. Sometimes this can seem like a solitary, self-focused, and even self-involved task, something we are dwelling on, a distraction from “moving on.” Nothing could be further from the truth. What we are really doing is focusing our own light on the parts of them they have left in us, the secrets they have placed in the depths of our being for us to find. Using our minds to concentrate the light God gave us the ability to employ, we plumb the different parts of ourselves to discover the truth of the person we have lost, both in relation to us and, if we can somehow manage it, also as a person in the world apart from us. One of the most surprising parts of my mourning for my father was my realization that I had actually never considered him as a person separate from me, separate from being my father. I had never

thought about the whole shape of his life, why he might have made the choices he did and pursued the paths he took. Shining a light on those parts of him, and on those parts of myself that reflected those choices, gave me greater understanding and greater comfort than I had just from thinking of him as my father, always already complete with choices already made and loose ends sewn up. And that has allowed me to reflect those parts of him into the world, letting light hit his truths and bounce off, pouring his soul's light back toward its source.

Rabbi Menahem ben Shlomo ha-Meiri, also known simply as the Meiri, who lived around the same time as these other commentators, considers all of them and concludes that each interpretation has its value:

There are those who interpret this, like Ibn Ezra, in a naturalistic way... And there are those who interpret it in a metaphorical way [we might say, like the ancient Midrash and Rashi]... And there are those who interpret it in the way of what is hidden [we might say, like Ralbag]... And then there are those who interpret it in the way of what is revealed [by it].

This "lamp of God" can be understood so many different ways. But what is most important, the Meiri teaches us, is what is revealed to us when we contemplate it. From the ancient rabbis, we learn to value the close, mutually dependent relationship that every person has with the divine, as we care for Torah and God cares for our souls in this world and in the next. From Rashi, we learn to be modest in our judgements of the living and the dead, realizing how much is unknown to us. From Ibn Ezra we learn to look for holiness in all parts of the life of one we have lost, the most transcendent and the most mundane. And from Ralbag we learn to plumb the depths of the secrets that those closest to us have hidden inside of us, to use our light to reflect their souls back into the world.

When we return home and light the candle, we seek to find a path through the mourning that faces us, a method that will help us continue to live in the world without the person who was so important in our lives. May the lamp of God light our way to comfort, to consolation, and to peace.

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