

Faith and Absurdity

A Teaching from Gershon...

The ancients told us that prior to the creation of humans, God called a meeting of attributes to discuss the plan. Arriving at the conference were Mercy, Truth, Righteousness and Peace. Mercy said: "Let them be created, for they will be merciful and compassionate beings." Truth protested and said: "Let them **not** be created, for they will just lie and cheat and promote falsehood all day long, and even their so-called mercifulness will be tainted by ulterior motives." Righteousness said: "Let them be created, for teven though it may be that they might act compassionately with ulterior motives, nonetheless, they will no doubt act righteously with one another, and that is enough." Peace protested and said: "Let them **not** be created, for Truth is right; they will only quarrel with one another and create one conflict after another, and do so even in the name of compassion and righteousness." What did God do? He took Truth and cast it into the earth, as is written in Psalms 85:12, "Truth shall sprout forth from the earth" (*Midrash Bereishis Rabbah* 8:5).

"The concealment of Truth," wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, "was necessary in order to make possible man's greatest adventure: to live in search. If Truth had not been concealed, there would be no need to choose, to search. If Truth had been permitted to prevail, Divinity would have overpowered the world and humanity would not have been possible" (*A Passion for Truth*, p. 296-297).

At the same time, the **burial** of Truth also meant the emergence and perpetuity of **falsehood**, which succeeded not only in deceiving humanity from the get-start, as so cleverly portrayed in the story of Adam and Eve, but also in overlaying the evolving human world with layer after layer of delusion so skillfully woven that it not only resembled reality but eventually replaced it altogether.

It is told that shortly after Solomon's marriage to the daughter of the Pharaoh, she wove a realistic image of the night sky, replete with all of the stars in their appropriate settings according to their constellatory arrangements during that particular season. One night, while the wisest man on earth was fast asleep, she draped the fabric over the window next to his bed, so that each time he awoke, he

would go right back to sleep, thinking it was still night. Many days and nights passed and all of Israel wondered what had happened to their king, until his mother, Bathsheba, finally burst into his bedchamber one morning and liberated him from his delusion by ripping the illusory fabric off the window.

Each of us operates within the confined space of our own unique universe, our own do-it-yourself reality assemblage. Each of us has conveniently created God and each other in our own image, reducing the unfathomable and ungraspable of Other to pint-size icons constructed out of imaginary conclusions predicated in turn upon assumptions we ourselves invented or out of compatible assumptions invented by others. We meander about completely oblivious to the misrepresentation of Truth into which we are born and which continues to compound daily, overshadowing principle with interest. And every now and then, when a smidgen of Truth manages to squeeze out of the constraints of the earth, how often do we find ourselves willfully ignoring its emergence in favor of the delusional gestalt of the majority or of our own home-brewn reality structures?

Truth is inconvenient. It is annoying. It challenges us to shed the skin we've grown so accustomed to and to – as the Torah narrative often puts it – “lift up our eyes and see” (Genesis 18:2). When we refer to our prophets as “seers,” we assume that they were inspired to see into the future, when in essence they were seeing Truth, and Truth – although hidden – does not hide. It wants to be searched for. It wants to be wanted. And when we open our eyes to see beyond the cataract of our delusions, beyond the conveniences of our assumptions, all becomes then revealed to us, past, present and future. When we allow the explosive head-on collision of Clarity and Absurdity, it is only **then** that we catch in that colossal moment a tinge of Truth.

A few years after the Holocaust, Jewish Agency representative Shlomo Zalman Shragai (1899-1995) – who would later become Jerusalem's first elected mayor -- was dispatched to his homeland Poland to aid in the emigration of extermination-camp survivors. When he was done with his

mission, he boarded a train to Paris and, due to his official capacity, was assigned his own private compartment.

The train that night was full, and Shragai noticed a poorly clad emaciated man leaning against a corner in a standing position since there were no more seats available. Feeling sorry for the man, Shlomo invited him to share his first-class compartment. Without a word, the man went with him, cast his crude overstuffed backpack on the cabin's luggage rack and sat down. And although Shragai attempted several times to engage him in conversation, the man remained silent and unresponsive, an intensely solemn expression masked across his darkened face.

As the train began its journey into the night, Shragai withdrew his prayer book and began to recite the evening prayer while the stranger just sat there, staring blankly into a space only he could perceive. The following morning, Shragai rose up, performed the ritual rinsing of his hands, put on his *tallis* and *tefillin* and began his morning prayers, while his guest remained motionless, his eyes fixated on oblivion. When he'd finished praying, the man finally spoke, his voice soft and guttural, virtually inaudible: "You're wondering why I haven't prayed. I cannot pray any more. Not after what happened in Auschwitz."

The ride to Paris from Warsaw, with all of its many stops in between, was long enough for yet another night to pass, and once again Shlomo rose up to do mid-day prayer followed by evening prayer, and once again his guest just sat there –not a word. Next morning, Shlomo did his ritual routine and put on his *tallis* and *tefillin* when he noticed the stranger slowly rising from his perch and reaching for his backpack. The man undid the straps and retrieved a threading velvet *tallis* bag from which he withdrew his *tallis* and *tefillin*, put them on while reciting their accompanying blessing prayers, and then began to recite the morning prayers verbatim and with fervor, his eyes tightly shut in deep concentration and intent.

When they had both completed their prayers and began to undo their *tefillin* straps, Shragai turned to the man and asked him, "Why **now**?"

Removing the black tefillin box from his forehead, the man replied: "It suddenly dawned on me how lonely God must be. Look at whom He's left with. I felt sorry for Him."

The man had been awakened by a hint of Truth, and a **hint** is all one needs to be able to penetrate the thickest density of despair, of doubt, of disappointment and disbelief. Here he was, a survivor of unimaginable suffering, who had rightly concluded that God, devotional prayer and religious practice – all of it – was pure unadulterated hogwash; that all of the teachings of the ancients about the compassionate deity who guides us in our daily life walk like a loving parent, is bogus; and that all those years he served God with reverence and appreciation, even in the aftermath of annual Easter Sunday pogroms, were a total waste. Because the God whose only-ness was declared by the lips of millions as they marched to their deaths failed to come through for them when they needed Him most.

And then, here he sits facing this fellow Jew who insists on continuing to acknowledge Him anyway, to pray to Him, exalt His Name, praise His works, even have the audacity to ask anything of He Who Failed to Answer. Watching this reflection of himself still maintaining a loving relationship with the God of Auschwitz, still draped in the *tallis*, still bound in the *tefillin*, still putting down the newspaper at dusk to recite evening prayers – all of this collided with every pain he'd felt, every number inscribed on his arm, every tear he'd shed before, during and after Auschwitz, until Truth gushed out of the earth like an exploding oil well, shattering all of his assumptions about God, about Good and Evil, about the suffering of the innocent, about how things ought to be, dissipating all of his delusions about existence and leaving him completely naked like Adam and Eve before they ate of the Fruit of Knowledge, with nothing around him or within him than Truth.

And that is when he reconnected. That is when he "lifted up his feet and went" (Genesis 29:1) and pulled the *tefillin* and *tallis* out of his threading pouch to once more don the mantle he had cast into the chasm of resignation and bind himself again to the unfathomable.

Disembarking in Paris, the two shook hands and were about to go their separate ways when Shragai said to the stranger: "I greatly respect you for having passed such an enormous test of faith."

"What? By praying again?"

"No, my friend. By still having packed your *tallis* and *tefillin* in your bundle."

Exactly.

The potency of his faith, in other words, was not his decision to reconnect and pray to all that he'd chosen to disconnect from. Rather, it was the **remnant** of connection to which he had clung tenaciously in spite of having every reason not to. "At times," wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, "we must believe in Him in spite of Him, to continue being a witness despite His hiding Himself.... Faith comes about in a collision of an unending passion for Truth and the failure to attain it by one's own means" (*A Passion for Truth*, p. 302).

The search for meaning in our lives is what moves us from one day to the next, from one circumstance to the next. We refuse to capitulate to our failures or to abandon Life in the wake of tragedies. And even though we don't always succeed in discovering meaning, or oftentimes when we do it is sabotaged by undeserved catastrophes, our unease around it is in itself a sign that meaning must exist somewhere and somehow in spite of the absurdity spinning around us.

"It is possible on the basis of personal experience to arrive at the conclusion that the human situation as far as one can see is absurd," wrote Heschel barely a year before his passing. "However, to stand face to face with the infinite world of stars and galaxies and to declare all of this absurd would be idiotic." Rather, the Jewish mindset -- in its tumultuous synthesis of thousands of years of amalgamated wisdom -- understands that "we are not the final arbiter of meaning," and that "what looks absurd within the limit of time may be luminous within the scope of eternity" (*A Passion for Truth*, p. 295).

Once upon a time, a king summoned his servants and instructed them to pour water into all of the barrels sitting in the courtyard. The servants proceeded

to do so when they realized that all of the barrels had holes in them and the water they poured into them poured right back out – so they stopped. All but one. He was unbothered by the holes and continued pouring water into his barrel regardless of the leakage.

“Fool!” cried the others. “Why do you keep pouring into the barrel when you know there are holes in it?!”

“Is it I who am the fool?” he replied. “Did the king not instruct us to **pour**? Did he say for us to **fill**?”

Exactly. Filling is a mortal delusion. Pouring is a divine truth. We are here to pour, not fill. And even if we can manage a patch or two across some of the holes, it is arrogant at best to assume we can stop the leaks entirely, because they are not our problem; they are the business of the king and him alone, and it is not for us to assume we can know their purpose. We are not here to **fix** the world, but to fine-tune it. That is the real meaning of Tikkun Olam.