

Vayera, and He appeared
Genesis 18:1-22:24
November 19, 2015
Temple Sinai

I. How do we live with Evil?

Evil is judgment without compassion, which is incomprehensible.
And then there is judgment with some kind of justice we can bend ourselves to understand.

We wrestle with it, look at it from every possible angle with no conclusion, just different ideas layered on top of one another, with no reconciliation.

This is Zohar.

Layer upon layer until there is confusion, and a shimmering glimpse of understanding the incomprehensible, and then it slips away, again.

So what ideas to we hear?

There is evil. There is harsh judgment without compassion—there are storms—and we must take shelter—in order to go on living after the storm has passed by.

“...when the Destroyer appears in the world a person should take cover in his house—not showing himself in the marketplace—so that he will not be destroyed, as it is said: ‘None of you shall go out the door of his house until morning (Exodus 12:22). These are the words that protected us from the slaying of the first born on Passover.

p. 157 Zohar Vol II, Matt

“Once permission has been granted to the Destroyer, he does not distinguish between righteous and wicked.”

Footnote 76, *ibid*.

“See what is written [regarding Lot and his family]: *As they were bringing them outside [he said, ‘Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, do not stop anywhere in the plain. Flee to the hills or you will be annihilated!]* Come and see: When judgment looms over the world a person should not let himself be found in the street, as has been said, because since judgment prevails, it does not distinguish between innocent and guilty. Nor should one gaze there—which is why, as has been said, Noah shut himself in the ark, so that he would not observe the world as judgment was being executed.”

p. 153 Zohar Vol II, Matt

Lot’s wife turned to look back. She turned into a pillar of salt.
Salt is death to soil itself. It can no longer bear fruit.

Sometimes we need to hide our eyes, not see the destruction. Sometimes bearing witness will destroy us. Sometimes we need to hide ourselves, so we can survive, to return work toward the good.

“...we have learned: ‘Where danger prevails, one should not rely on a miracle.’”

p. 167 Zohar Vol II, Matt

“*Some are swept away by injustice.*” (Proverbs 12:23)

p. 169 Zohar Vol II, Matt

“Once permission has been granted to the Destroyer, he does not distinguish between righteous and wicked.’ ...Our Rabbis taught :‘A plague in town? Keep your feet indoors.’ ...”One should not

walk in the middle of the road, because the Angel of death walks there—for as soon as permission has been granted him, he strides brazenly.”
footnote 412, *ibid*.

Sometimes this is true. We just can't look. We just can't know. We just can't understand.

And then there is the judgment which comes about as a result of our deeds.

Cause and effect.

How can we tell the difference? How do we infer a causal relationship?

Is it helpful?

We are taught by our sages that both the failure of Sodom and Gomorrah and the failure of Abraham brought about dire consequences.

In Sodom and Gomorra—their sin was having no capacity for charity and kindness. The Accuser was given free rein. Because of the virtues of Abraham, Lot and his family were saved. Selfishness gives the accuser permission without limit.

Rav Kook wrote on the selfishness of the Sodomites

...The people of Sodom were obsessed with fulfilling their physical desires. They concentrated on self-gratification to such a degree that no time remained for kindness toward others. They expended all of their efforts in chasing after material pleasures, and no energy was left for helping the stranger.”

p. 44, Rav Kook

“The problem with Sodom was not just that the people of Sodom were cruel. Rather, the very fabric of the Sodomite society was corrupt, based on their abhorrence of kindness. They based their municipal regulations on an ideology of selfishness and self-interest.”

p. 47, Rav Kook

And, even more radically, the horror of the binding of Isaac is explained as justice meted out to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham offered nothing to the poor and no offering of a turtledove to God, and Sarah mocked God at the feast of weaning of Isaac (Genesis 21:8), the demand of the binding of Isaac was punishment.

From the Zohar:

“Now we have learned that the Accuser comes to every joyous meal to see if the host has already provided for the poor

or invited the poor into his home.

If so, the Accuser departs and does not enter.

If not, he enters and witnesses this chaos of joy

Without poor, without gifts for the poor.

Then he rises above and accuses the host.

p. 70, Abridged Zohar, Matt

“Rabbi El'azer said, ‘come and see how kindly the blessed Holy One treats all creatures, especially those who walk in His paths. For even when He is about to execute judgment upon the world, He creates an opportunity for His beloved to demonstrate virtue before judgment arrives. For we have learned: When the blessed Holy One loves someone He sends him a gift. What is that? A poor person, so that he may gain merit through him and thereby draw upon himself a thread emanating from the right side—spreading over his head, designating him, so that when judgment arrives, the Destroyer will be wary of him. So the blessed Holy One provides him in advance an opportunity to demonstrate virtue.”

p. 137, Zohar Vol II, Matt

“even when the blessed Holy One sits in judgment over the world, He does not change, for He sits in judgment over one and in compassion over another simultaneously.”

“Rabbi Yehudah said, But it is written: As for me, may my prayer come to You O YHVH, at a time of favor (Psalms 69:14)! Certain times are a time of favor, certain times are not; sometimes He listens, sometimes not; sometimes He is found, sometimes not, as is written “Seek YHVH while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. (Isaiah 55:6)
p. 143, Zohar Vol II, Matt

We devise ways of understanding.

“God is accessible to an individual or a particular location only at certain times, but is always accessible to the community or in the world as a whole.”
Footnote 213, p. 143, Zohar Vol II, Matt

So we pray as a community.

Let’s wrestle with this ambiguity. We know nothing in the face of the Infinite.

II. How do we live with Infinite Unknowing?

Faith is the only antidote for not knowing, to the ubiquitous fear of not knowing.

How do we find our way to faith?

We are taught: by fully engaging awe, the magnitude of what we cannot know.

Surrendering, and coming out the other side, to the refuge of nothingness, the All. Our small world always needs the perspective of a larger container. The largest container of all is that there is no edge to the container. So we enter Awe, and the relief that comes from learning we are not the center of the universe. Then, and only then, can there be true movement toward compassion and generosity, and the ability to see the pain of others as well as our own.

Awe and service must not be separated. First there is the realization of Awe. And then there is the movement to service.
pp. 164-5, Zohar Vol II, Matt

Paraphrasing the Isbitzer:

We begin with the fear of Elohim, and then can move to the next level, awe of YHVH

With the fear of judgment, we move toward purification of our heart, our intentions, and our actions.

With purification comes the understanding, the awe of YHVH is an obligation to the community, and to Yah.

pp. 40-50, Isbitzer

It’s not about me.

The Sefat Emet offers us this practice:

Abraham established the dawn prayer service...”

“This is the way of those who serve God. They are called ‘walkers,’ as scripture says: Speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up” {Deut. 6:7} All of a person’s days are a single journey... ‘May we arise and find our heart’s hope.’ For this is a sign that we truly love God: if as soon as we awaken we can recall our Creator, before we do anything else...”

“May we arise and find our heart’s hope.”

p. 28, Sefat Emet

On the Sabbath, the power of the other side is removed, freeing us to love completely. Generosity of spirit is revealed.

“...when the power of the other side is removed, and the full light of the soul, the ‘extra soul’, is seen. This is revealed in the desires and longings of the soul that come out on the Sabbath.”
p. 29, Sefat Emet

We practice remembering awe. We practice remembering what it is to serve. We practice remembering how to receive love in order to complete union. We practice faith in the context of uncertainty.

III. Reaching toward union, and always returning to service

“Rabbi Abba opened, ‘Who may ascend the mountain of YHVH? Who may stand in His holy place? (Psalm 24:3).’ Who sees, who considers, who contemplates, the foundation of their existence in the world?
pp. 120-1, Zohar Vol II, Matt

“As one’s aspiration is directed in this world, so he draws upon himself a spirit from above, corresponding to the aspiration to which he cleaves. But this can be dangerous—you can stray from the rite of the blessed holy One.”
p. 122, Zohar Vol II, Matt

Not by special rites do we know God; not by idols; and not by vanity.
But by worthy deeds.
p. 124, Zohar Vol II, Matt

“But indeed... the blessed Holy One... is known and grasped to the degree that each one opens the gates of the imagination, according to the capacity to attain the spirit of wisdom. As one fathoms in his mind, so He is *known* in his mind. So He is known in those gates. But can He be known accurately? No one has ever been able to grasp and know Him.
p. 133 Zohar Vol II, Matt

“The human soul is unknowable except [for a slipping into place]...carrying out what the soul designs. So she is known and unknown.”

“Similarly, the blessed Holy One is known and unknown, for He is soul of soul, spirit of spirit, hidden and concealed from all, but through those gates, openings for the soul, the blessed Holy One becomes known.”
p. 134, Zohar Vol II, Matt

Footnote 131 Zohar vol 2

[For] The human soul originates in God, who is the essence of this essence.

These cryptic sentences, known and unknown, knowledge slipping through the gates...
Where does this leave us seekers of God, seekers of virtue?

All we really know is that we must be of service to the All— with hospitality, generosity, and an obligation to the collective, and with the aspiration of the heart, and mind, and might.

Shekinah is also known as the Sod ha-Efshar (Secret of the Possible’) since through Her, creation is continually formed and transformed.”
p. 158, Zohar Vol II, Matt

“...the feminine Shekinah is affected by human activity. She is a face that God shows to the world, and God is present everywhere potentially, but ‘realized’ only when humans act ethically. For this reason Shekhinah is also called Sof Ha-Eshar, ‘the secret of the possible.’
From a lecture Daniel Matt gave in New Mexico, Dec. 31, 2015

Zohar makes use of the potter’s wheel image:

“The wheel spins constantly to the right never dragging, and the world revolves accordingly. However, if humans begin to do wrong, the blessed Holy One spins His constantly spinning device—which has maintained a rightward spin—to the left, rotating wheels and previously fashioned vessels leftward. The potter’s wheel spins and events in the world come about harmfully for humans. The wheel keeps spinning in that direction until people return to acting well. It turns upon human deeds, *so by His device, according to their deeds*—never standing still.
pp. 158-9, Zohar Vol II, Matt

All we can do is work for the good in face of incomprehension.

A prayer for these times:

*Up and through the individual volition
Supported by the pillars of the world
to the higher realm*

*Out of awe
Out of obligation
Elohim*

*For the collective good
For the All
YHVH*

*And when we are overwhelmed,
depleted from inside or outside,
the Sabbath is required.
Sheltered, apart, incubated from the accuser,
we can be renewed to volition.*

*When Evil arrives, we must
hide until the storm is over.*

*And then we emerge, to work again.
Up and through the individual,
joining the community,
supported, with a dedicated heart,
for the good of All.*