

April 18, 2015
Temple Sinai
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***Shemini* (eighth)
Leviticus 9:1 - 11:47**

The tabernacle, the tent of meeting is built. The presence of the Lord is within. Aaron and his sons have spent seven days in preparation, of ordination, their sanctification into the priesthood. This is the eighth day.

It is as if this were the first day after the week of creation. We are to begin the tasks of our lives. How do we live? How do we live well, in relationship to our work, our families, our community, to the Divine? How can we deliberately focus our attention so we move toward Holiness?

Today, in this meditative contemplation, we are going to hold up, within the container of this relative silence, ideas from the Zohar written about this portion. Everything is simply a metaphor. There are layers upon layers. You will resonate with some, and others you won't even hear, and still others you will disregard, as they don't belong to you.

I am hoping that language is not an obstacle, but a point of departure, which you can turn into your own personal exploration. If you chafe against words, then the chafing itself can be put to use as your own work. You can enter into your reaction so closely that it dissolves into its component parts: words, letters, sounds, sensation, and then return to a moment of silence. Over and over again.

If the inevitable sounds in this room are paramount, then listen well. Whether you hear the external or internal noise as an annoyance or as music, that is what fills awareness, only to dissolve again and again.

In this portion, there are the horrific deaths of Aaron's two sons, and there are the dietary laws, governing permitted and forbidden foods. This seems like such an odd pairing. The text of the Zohar bridges these in such way that it lends itself well to contemplation.

The usual Midrash on the deaths of the two sons swing between two attempts to rationalize the incomprehensible. For example: the sons died because they were guilty of arrogance or drunkenness or because of the infraction of not being married. Another position posits that they so righteous, so pure, their tiny infraction of an "alien fire" had disastrous consequences.

A third, non-rational approach, explains that they were taken up in a moment of rapture, of union of their souls with God. They abandoned mortal life. They forgot any commitment to being in this world.

This mystical interpretation asks us: if we are going to live in this earth, be embodied, eat, breath, live well, how are we to do it and stay in relationship to the Holy, so we may be Holy. The dietary laws become a metaphor, a vehicle, to guide us into separating the sacred from the defiled. In the Zohar, defilement has idolatry at its root. It is idolatry anytime we forget the presence of the Holy in all things. We must consider what we put into our mouths, our food, and what comes out of our mouths, our speech. Can we remember the Presence or do we attach our self to something lesser, as food enters, or words leave our mouths?

So, as you are ready, you can begin to draw your attention inward. If you like, you can focus your attention on your breath, finding a way to sit as comfortably as you can in the moment, moving toward stillness. When you have a desire to move, note the intention to move before you move. The sounds of the room, and of the world outside this room, all become part of the field of awareness. All of your habitual reactivity becomes highlighted in the relative silence. Make room for it all, and return to the breath and the constantly changing sensations of just sitting here.

I will talk, you can listen, or not.

This is a meditation in three parts, filled with ideas or metaphors, enough that you can take in some and make them your own, and some you can disregard. Then there will be a Hebrew chant, which resonates to the intent of the words. This will be followed by a period of silence. The sound continues even after it is spoken.

Part 1 (The *bet* as a metaphor, an image, a model for opening up to the Divine)

Here is a little joke, which my teacher told me:

Why did God create the universe?
Because God wanted to be known.

From the Zohar:

By the Torah the world was created.

By the Torah man was was created.

We can understand, we can hear the word “Torah”, as Wisdom.

“...*God said, ‘Let us make a human’* (Genesis 1:26) The blessed Holy One said to Torah, ‘I wish to create a human.’

She replied, ‘This human is destined to provoke You. Unless You are patient with him, how will he endure in the world?’

He said to her, ‘You and I will sustain him in the world, for I am not called *slow to anger* for no reason”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 209)

From Torah the world, and man, were created. This universe is made up of Divine speech: made up of consonants, vowels, sounds, minute expulsions of breath issuing from the Speaker’s mouth. A tree, a pet, a foe, a rock, our selves, all made up of the same essence, made up of the letters, of the sounds. This same Presence is in all things, in all beings.

The Zohar uses the letter *bet* to find an underlying structure for this portion. The *bet* is the house. It has a line at the bottom, a line at the top, and a vertical line on the right side, and an opening on the left.

From the Zohar:

“...Why is the *bet* open and closed? Well, when a person comes to conjoin with Torah, she is open to receive him and partner with him; but when a person closes his eyes to her and walks backward, then she is closed on the other side. He does not find an opening until he returns to join her face-to-face, never to be forgotten by him.

So Torah opens herself to people, proclaiming to them, *To you, men, I call out...*(Proverbs 8:4); and it is written *At the bustling crossroads she calls, in the gateways of the city she utters her sayings* (Proverbs 1:21).

...*Bet*—two roofs and one [line] joining them. What does this indicate? Well, one for heaven, and one for earth, and the blessed Holy One joining and supporting them.”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, pp. 209-10)

Chant: Ashrei yoshvay vaytecha, od y’halelucha

“Happy are those who dwell in your house, they are forever praising.”

Silence

Part 2 (Three different models of prayer as it relates to the death of Aaron's sons. Still working with the vertical line of the *bet*.)

The vertical line of the *bet* -- the Holy One: where Heaven joins earth, night joins day, unites left and right, unites justice and mercy, unites male and female.

This vertical plane, the reaching up and the reaching down, we will consider it three different ways. You will consider it only in ways that are useful to you.

First, there is the priestly function, Aaron's function--the mediation between heaven and earth.

Secondly, there is our own internal yearning for union with the Divine. We yearn for peace. We yearn to be joined in the tasks of our own embodiment.

And, finally, there is the consideration of Aaron's loss, in the vastness of his silence. Grief is a bridge between heaven and earth. We touch mystery, the inexplicable.

1. The priestly function

So, the first is the priestly function of Aaron and his sons.

After Aaron makes the peace offering in the tabernacle, there is perfection for a few moments. All sins are nullified.

This peace is shattered by the tragedy of the sons. They make their offering of "alien fire", and they are consumed.

From the Zohar:

The community of Israel was not united through them. Being unmarried means they were not able to unite with the feminine aspect of the Divine. They are conjoined with no one. They are not bound to the earthy plane. The Divine Feminine is not included. She is left outside.

Their offering becomes their personal union with God.

The priest must work for the union of heaven and earth. It cannot be for the self, or ones own family, but for the community as a whole. The priestly function is not personal.

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 223)

And some of us occasionally perform this function.

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2. The personal prayer

If we are not serving a priestly function, we can focus on the personal. How do we bridge heaven and earth?

A metaphor:

If our souls are called upon to be a lamp of God

[Proverbs 20:27]

then we remember that the flame of our lamp is the vertical bridge between heaven and earth. The lamp's flame reaches upward at the same time it is bound to the wick and the oil below. In prayer, we hover between transcendence and the embodied life.

And we endeavor to make our life a prayer. This is our prayer

(From Rabbi Simon Jacobson, based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

3. Through grief

And we can focus on Aaron's enormous and sudden loss.

Aaron's silence.

What has just happened to his children is inconceivable, incomprehensible.

No matter how hard we try to understand these deaths, make it rational – because they were good or bad, as reward or punishment, all understanding falls apart.

There is just grief. The fabric of the known universe is ripped open. We stand at the edge, between the known and the unknowable, alone, and with all other souls who have ever grieved. We touch the realm that exists before articulation.

Chant: Tikon T'filati k'toret l'fanecha

Let my prayer be set forth like incense before you (Psalm 141:2)

silence

Part 3 (How do we live, connecting and disconnecting from the Holy stream of life)

Hayeh I am that I am

This *Hayeh* brought forth man.

“And the *whole soul of the living being, that crawls* (Genesis 1:21)—the *soul* that the supernal earth brought forth from that *hayyah, living being*, supreme above all, as it is written: *Let the earth bring forth nefesh, hayyah, a soul of a living being.*”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 240)

That supernal river, the steam of emanation, “flowing forth and water this [cosmic] Tree, so that it may spread its roots over all and provide nourishment for all.”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 240)

“Happy are the people of Israel, for they are holy and the blessed Holy One seeks to sanctify them? Come and see: Eternal life that holy Israel inherits depends entirely on the World that is Coming, [coming, constantly coming, never ceasing; the continuous source of emanation], since that is life for all, above and below, and it is the place...from there life and holiness issue to all.”

“He is called the Tree of life--a tree from the place called Life, which from which life issues...”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 243)

So how do we live knowing this? How do we find our way?

How do we keep the *bet* open on its left side? How do we open and close our self off?

It is through striving to unite compassion and justice, “so that they couple as one”.

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 246)

Compassion and justice need each other. Otherwise one is swept away.

“Come and see: Oil for the priests and wine for the Levites—not because they need wine but rather from [holy] wine, coming to their side to unite all as one, to delight all worlds, so that all will be right, merging as one, imbued with affection of all and love of the faithful.”

“For one who joins his aspiration to this becomes complete in this world and in the world that is coming, thereby cleaving all his days to Teshuvah—the place where wine and oil are found. Then he will not cling to this world, neither to its riches nor its cravings....for other riches are reserved for him, in which he will share, having a share in the world that is coming [, constantly coming]. Whoever loves this place does not need wealth or pursue it. Happy are the righteous who strive for supernal wealth every day...”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 247)

What is defilement? How do we close ourselves off from the eternal emanation, the eternal flow?

The Zohar says the idolater brings the defilement. What is an idolater; what is an idol?

When God is included, there is no defilement, and judgment and mercy are joined. What is it to include the Divine in all things?

So, what do we eat, what do we say? How do we use our mouths to eat, to speak or pray? What are the thoughts that precede our words? What are the deeds we perform which follow our thoughts and our words?

from the Zohar:

“Oral Torah...is based on the mouth. What is the mouth? Knowledge, which is the mouth of the book and the writing.”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 249)

“*YHVH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘These are the living being that you may eat of all the animals that are on the land’* (Beviticus 11:1-2) Why is Aaron mentioned here? Well, because he is always poised to distinguish between impure and pure...”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 250)

“...*Who is the man desiring life, loving many days to see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit* (Psalms 3:13-14) And it is written: *He who guards his mouth and his tongue guards his soul from trouble* (Proverbs 21:23).” (Proverbs 21:23)

“*Who is the man desiring life?* What is *life*? Well, the life called World that is Coming, where life abides. Thus we have learned: Tree of Life—a tree from that life, a tree planted in that life.”

“...One who desires to have a share in life above, and one who desires to cleave lovingly to those days, should guard his mouth from all—guarding his mouth from food and drink that defiles the soul and removes a person from that life and from those days, and guarding his mouth from words of evil, so as not to be defiled by them; he should keep far away from them and have no part in them.”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 251)

And through loving-kindness we return to the flow, even when we have closed our self off.

“As it is written: *I will sprinkle pure water upon you [the flow of loving-kindness], and you will be pure; from all your impurities and from all your idols will I purify you.* (Ezekiel 36:25) Once they are purified, they will be sanctified. And the people of Israel who cleave to the blessed Holy One, are called holy....Happy are the people of Israel, of whom the blessed Holy one says, *Be holy, for I YHVH am holy.* (Leviticus 11:44).”

(Zohar VII, Daniel Matt translator, p. 257)

Chant: “Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow God will work wonders among you.”

Hitkadashu ki machar ya’aseh Yah b’kirb’chem niflaot. (Joshua 3:5)

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