A Different Perspective
Discovering Love at Dawn
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The photograph above—my last before becoming a parent—was taken early in the morning on January 7, 2015, the coldest day of a very young year. In my imagination, Jonah was born just after, as the sun was rising over the city. In reality, he was not. He was born at 11:11 a.m., when the sun was already high in the sky. But, like the Dove of the Morning, I remember him coming at dawn.

Parashat Bo introduces us to three of the four children mentioned in the Passover Haggadah, the children who will ask year in and year out why we’re doing all of this and to whom we owe the unpayable debt of deepest selves and our truest answers. It is, I believe, quite significant that the first of the four appears not after the final plague, but instead after the penultimate one, the plague of “darkness that can be touched.” It is only then that she is born into the world, a lamp in the shadows, and in her voice I hear the voices of the Kabbalists who teach that is the darkness itself that creates the light.

There are many seasons of heavenly disclosure. But the only revelation I have ever received—the bottomless mystery of my love for our son—arrived in the deepest crevice of winter and, in my own personal mythology, with the dark light of sunrise. I have no doubt that my own experience of becoming a parent, though unique in its relatively minor details, is in broad strokes quite ordinary, and this only amplifies the awesomeness of the revelation. If I feel this way about my child then it stands to reason that billions of others feel this way about their children as well. And so the first thing that Jonah taught me is that there is infinitely more love in the world than I ever imagined possible. It is, in the words of Kohelet that I understand only now, “deep, deep, who can find it?”

Wise, wicked, simple, and unknowing, we are all, at one time or another, each of the Four Children. This year, my son is undoubtedly the eino yode’ah ishol, the unknowing. Here is the beginning of my answer to him.

Lord, where will I find You?
Your place is remote and concealed.
And where will I not find You?
Your being fills the world.

—Yehudah Halevi (trans. Hillel Halkin)

His glory fills the universe.
His ministering angels ask each other, “Where is the place of His glory?”

—Shabbat Musaf Kedusha

There are a few texts that have helped me get through dark and difficult periods in my religious life, first amongst them being several paragraphs by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik buried in a footnote in his essay Halakhic Man. At another stage of my life long since gone, I yearned for a simple faith in God. I yearned for a transcendent framework that might help me feel closer to a God that too many times felt too far away. I had believed that a sense of wholeness and integration were possible goals for the religious life.

But life kept on getting in the way.

And with one swoosh of the hand, Rabbi Soloveitchik dismissed these romantic and unconstructive hopes of mine. He writes: “That religious consciousness in man’s experience. . . is not that simple and comfortable. On the contrary, it is exceptionally complex, rigorous, and tortuous. Where you find its complexity, there you find its greatness. The religious experience, from beginning to end, is antinomic and antithetic.” (Halakhic Man, fn. 4)

Here, I understood the Rav to be telling me that the oasis that I prayed for—of a creative synthesis of the tensions that I felt in my religious life—was a mirage. There would be no resolutions to the many contradictions that existed in the fabric of creation. The religious life is not and cannot be meant to bring psychic peace to a stormy sea. Rather, the world and our relationship to God are built on the bricks of conflicting ideas that will never fit together in an orderly manner: The human being was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and the human being is also dust (Gen. 2:7). God is transcendent and immanent;
teaches that Pharaoh represents the primordial Vacated Space (hallal hapanui) that was needed to birth the world: in order for God to create Heaven and Earth, God had to withdraw and contract (tzimtzum) Godself to make room for the world to come into existence. In this Vacated Space, Rebbe Nahman tells us, “There is, as it were, no Divinity there. Were it not so, it would not be a vacated space...and there would be no room for the creation of the world.” (Likutei Moharan 64:1)

Rebbe Nahman places this kabbalistic teaching within a new framework. He reminds us of the foundational paradox that births all of creation: For the world to exist, God must be absent.

Having stated this thesis, Rebbe Nahman also claims that this thesis is impossible. He follows up with what amounts to the antithesis of this idea of the Vacated Space: “However, the ultimate truth is—nonetheless—that Divinity is there, for nothing exists without God’s life-force.” (64:1)

So now, with the invitation to join God and Pharaoh—who symbolizes the Vacated Space—God, in essence, is asking Moses to confront and hold onto two contradictory ideas (shnei hafakhim): God is present and God is absent in the Vacated Space that represents creation.

And here is the key for Rebbe Nahman—there is no way for Moses or anyone else to reconcile these two opposing truths! There is no way to understand rationally how God is simultaneously present and absent in the Vacated Space. Reason can only get us so far in approaching the Ultimate Mystery of the universe.

At this very moment of impossibility, with this paradox, faith is required. God’s (seeming) absence and God’s invitation to join God in this absence (“Bo el Paroh”) presents us with an opportunity to build a type of faith, frankly, that God’s presence cannot offer.

Instead of understanding the competing truths that are part of the texture of our relationship with God and the world as a source of pain, Rebbe Nahman teaches these paradoxes should be seen as an opportunity for a faith that transcends irreconcilable tensions.

For me, confronting these paradoxes reminds me that God is ultimately unknowable. We will never be able to understand how God works in the world. Now with the great humility this knowledge must engender we are asked to commit ourselves to God none the less. Rebbe Nahman teaches us that experiencing a sense of God’s absence need not bring us to spiritual crisis. On the contrary, it can bring us to a living and dynamic faith, a mature relationship with God, and a humble awareness of the world’s Ultimate Mystery.

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