

**In Praise of Junior Partners:
The Game of *Myst* and the Journey of the Soul
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5764
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Call me Isabel. Some days ago – never mind how long precisely -- I thought I would sail about a little, and see the watery part of the world. Or rather, in this drizzly September of the soul, it came to us. From the ocean once we came. Its force, its very breath holds a power on us still.

We are one, with the prophet Elijah: “There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks... but the Eternal God was not in the wind. After the wind – an earthquake; but the Eternal was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake – fire; but the Eternal was not in the fire. And after the fire, *kol d’ma daka*. A still, small voice. A soft murmuring sound.” Where, indeed, in all this world, is the power, and the presence, of God?

In just this past month I have gone from the depths of despair to the heights of pride and joy, and crashing back again, in what I sometimes treat as one of the most important aspects of my life, my relationship... with my computer. “Attention: you have just performed an illegal function.” Oh, yeah? Hey, no wonder Microsoft is in trouble with the feds. But then it gets worse: “You have performed a permanent, fatal error.” Hey, Bill Gates! Now you’re messing with a higher authority... than the United States Government.

Last month, I contracted... a “worm.” I diligently downloaded a “patch.” I “upgraded” my OS. I was really proud until I realized that I could sound out all these words, but that I had *no earthly idea* what I had just done. None of that frustration, though... none of it compared to not having access to my computer at all.

This was the week when the lights went out on Georgia. And in the rest of our region. It was a bracing reminder of our dependence on the machines of our lives. A realization in the midst of enforced simplicity that something has gone wrong. That the tools have become the master. A new appreciation for the unseen ways – not just in wires and in lines but in relationship and community – the unseen ways in which we are all connected.

More troubling, though, is the way we tell the tale: we refer to electricity as “power.” And words shape worlds. If electricity is power, then people without it are “powerless.”

My friends, we are human beings. Despite what we may think in the darkest throes of depression and despair – indeed, even in the shadow of 9/11 -- we are very rarely truly without power.

Some time back, Julie gave me a special gift for my birthday: my first computer game on CD. By now it’s almost out-of-date, what with IMing and DVDs and 3-D holographic images coming down the pike. Still, as an upgrade from Space Invaders -- or, before that, Pong -- I was thrilled with the gift. Julie was

careful in her purchase; she wanted something appropriate to my level, so she consulted young kids. She came home with a game called “Myst.”

My teacher Rabbi Larry Kushner also had this game. This is how he describes it: “At the beginning you look at the screen and find yourself on an island. There’s a dock, a forest, buildings, stairways. The... effects are impressive. There are no instructions, no rules. You ‘go’ places by aiming and clicking. You can look up and down, turn around, climb stairs, wander all around. Everywhere there are things to discover... machines to operate, books you can open and read. And the purpose? To figure out what you’re doing there. But,” Kushner concludes, “virtual reality, shmirtual reality: this is *no* game. What’s going on here? Why am I here? Are there any rules? How does my behavior affect what is going on?”

Rabbi Kushner is right. What’s going on? Why are we here? It’s not a game. This is life.

Two years ago, in the aftermath of the attack, I shared with you my belief that there is not so much inherent meaning in the events of our lives, rather that we function as meaning makers. If that is true, then what is the meaning we make of the world? Not just as human beings; as Jews. Were there some first Jewish answers to these questions, some primary insights that set us on our own, and on our way?

My friends, I want to tell you what I think Judaism was all about when it started... what it can be all about still.

First: I believe that Judaism came to teach us that we are God's partners. Second: we are here to give expression to the oneness of the world.

Finally: I believe that the best place to learn that lesson, to live that oneness, is a sacred community open to harmony, the holiness at the heart of life.

What's going on? Why are we here? These are precisely the kind of questions that a religious tradition is *supposed* to handle.

So we turn towards our tradition, towards two verses in particular, the journey of a man, and the making of a world. For, as Bible scholar Shalom Paul has said, there is an intimate link between Genesis 12:1, in which Abraham sets out from familiar haunts to a land he did not know, and Genesis 1:1. There is an umbilical connection, an unbreakable bond between why we left Mesopotamia and began that journey called Judaism, and what we believed, so very long ago, about the nature of the world and our place in it.

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine the world we left behind. Step with me into yesteryear, four thousand years ago, and picture yourselves at an imaginary Mesopotamian center of higher learning which Dr. Paul calls the U of

M. Now, at this fictional university, you could have majored in many things. You could study Political Science, and you would learn about new experiments with a form of government called democracy. Oh, the word may be Greek, but the concept comes from your campus, from the area right between the Tigris and Euphrates. Or: you could study architecture, and visit the pillars of your civilization, the step-stage tiered towers leading to heaven called ziggurats, which, unlike their pyramidal cousins in the Egyptian south, were monuments of life rather than mausoleums of death. (By the way, a Babylonian construction worker was once caught inside one of these structures that caught fire, and so the ancient Mesopotamians were also the first to learn that smoking ziggurats are bad for your health.) In math class you would be taught that the position of the digit determines its value, and that your society had a cipher for the zero, a discovery later forgotten, reinvented, and ascribed to others. If you were in medical school you would study texts void of superstitious incantations, which developed diagnostic techniques in great detail. You would watch as doctors performed the first cranial lobotomy.

You can probably guess where I am going with all of this. These were no backwater country bumpkins that Abraham left behind. Mesopotamia was, far and away, the most advanced civilization the world had known. So, *nu?* Why did he leave?

The key to that question comes from a different department, in the course on comparative literature...and mythology. The answer comes here, because, remember: a myth is *not* something fabricated. Myths are the master story we tell about ourselves. They are the psychic sub-texts of the human spirit.

The Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, tells of a celestial confrontation, a war between the Elder Gods who want quiet, and the Younger Gods, who want to party. The Younger Gods prevail. Their champion Marduk fashions heaven and earth from the sundered body of the goddess Tiamat. When the victorious gods complain about having to do chores, Marduk uses the blood of Tiamat's slain husband to make male human beings. In the Mesopotamian myth of creation, then, man is an afterthought. And a butler.

Now, there is a couple sitting in the front row of Comp Lit 101. They begin talking to each other. And they say something that, maybe, no one else had noticed. When they read the *Enuma Elish*, they remark how odd it is that the gods are born. And eat. They die. These gods were *subject* to the laws of nature. Soon this couple concluded that gods that have material needs are nothing more than *projections* of human beings.

Abraham and Sarah left Mesopotamia because of they believed that God made nature, not the other way around. The creation story they began to tell was quite different than the *Enuma Elish*. Oh, it was *based on* the earlier tale, a *reaction* to it, a biting polemic against it. This is why, by the way, the literal, the

fundamentalist approach to the Bible is not *only* superficial, but intellectually flawed. You have to know *what the first chapter of Genesis was reacting to* in order to understand what it is trying to say. If you don't know that the story is a *response* to something that came before, *of course* you'll be tempted to take its details too literally.

This is the point of our story: The words we weave, the tale we tell is of a single power, not *subject to* but *inherent in* all of nature. The tale we tell is of human beings made not as an afterthought, but as the climax of creation; that we are better than butlers, more than mere servants. Our creation myth teaches that, in naming the animals, in tilling and tending, in caring for and cultivating this planet we are partners with the Holy One of Blessing. Junior partners, to be sure. But we are not nothing. We are partners with God in the ongoing act of creation, of bringing forth the kind of world God wants.

And we bring forth that world when we bear witness to the power that inheres in all, that oneness at the heart of life.

What is the central declaration of Judaism? What words are so familiar that one child referred to them as the “washword of our face?” They are the words of the *Shema*. “*Shema, Yisrael. Hear, O Israel. Listen. Adonai, Eloheinu. Our God. Adonai Echad.* {Or, as my daughter Talia says on going to bed: “*Adonai Good Night.*”) The Eternal God is One. There is a single power as the source of all, a unity at the heart of life.”

If God is One and the world is whole, then all areas of life are filled with God's presence, with the promise and possibility of holiness. Indeed, our tradition teaches that there is a *beracha*, a blessing for *everything* in life, for the first butterfly seen in spring, the first fruit of a season, the rainbows of summer, even the storms of September, the experience of greeting a familiar face, or of learning something new. There's even a blessing for the czar.

If God is One and the world is whole, then scientists may someday discover that all their equations are the same, that the forces of the universe are the same. And, indeed, the most modern myth of cosmology now speaks of a Grand Unified Theory, the first fractions of a second of existence, during which electromagnetism and gravity, and the strong and weak nuclear forces are all one, joined together for that tiniest instant into one singularity whose echoes reverberate still in the throbbing pulse of the universe. Some scientists even call this theory "the God Equation."

If God is One and the world is whole, then we will come to see that everything is connected... that the words we use are mere symbols for that which are not separate things at all. Daniel Matt writes that as he looks out his window and sees a leaf on a tree [assuming his trees were still standing], the name "leaf" may be "mentally satisfying." But is there really, he asks, a separate object called a leaf, "as if the leaf were not part of a continuum: blade-veins-stem-stipule-twig-branch-limb-bough-trunk-root?" As if the tree, too, were not part of a continuum

of its own. As if all of it, and all of us, were not made of the very same substance, the same molecules arranged in different ways, you and me, an antelope, a redwood, the moons of Jupiter, a distant star.

If God is One and the world is not yet the way it should be, then as partners with God it is up to us to make it better. If God is One and the world is not yet the way it should be, then the lesson we have to teach is that someday differences *will* disappear, the fissures will heal and the fractures be fixed.

We live in a world in which everything is connected. There is a harmony at the heart of life. Even that which seems separate and distinct is bound up together. Our greatest task, our human role is to explore and expose, to discover and reveal the connections beneath the surface of our lives, through the place we make, the space we create in our community with one another.

My friends, as I look out at you this morning, I see a *good* synagogue, a healthy community, opportunities for everyone. Here there is a remarkable spirit, a sense of inclusiveness, of ownership, of being there for each other. Oh, we make mistakes, as will happen in any institution. But in so many ways this is a community that cares. From these halls we have rolled up our sleeves to bring food to those who hunger, shelter to those who need homes, help to those who are new to our land and hope to those imprisoned in loneliness and isolation. Here we have danced at each other's *simchas*, and held each other in pain. Here have

we taught Torah, from here we have tried to love its words and live its message. Often, we are, indeed, conveyers of *Shalom*, bringers of peace, of integrity, of wholeness, witness to the coming together of all the disparate parts of our lives.

We are here for all of these things -- but for something more as well. Close your eyes. Feel your breath. Hear your heart. And know that here we can also hear... the echoes of Elijah, the stillness that follows the storm, the voice which speaks in silence. It is the sound of Sinai and the dreams of Genesis; our finding a place for the One who set Abraham on his way, the One who Spoke and the world came to be.

One woman wrote about her own spiritual journey. [She'd been involved in a synagogue for quite a few years, but involved in the way many of us begin, at a social level, at a secular level – for programs she found interesting, at a pediatric level - for the children, at a gastronomic level- for the good *oneg*. But then tragedy struck. And her relationship with her synagogue changed.] “My initiation into the spiritual aspects of Judaism,” she writes,

“occurred when I lost my 34-year old brother in a car accident. Until then, everything had gone smoothly for our family. In that startling moment we discovered that randomness in the universe can topple one’s sense of equilibrium. And, out of an increased need for deeper meaning, we turned again to our temple. Temple became a place to ask questions about the nature of God; to think; to wonder; to explore thoughts that seemed out of place in the everyday world. In our fast paced world, there is little tolerance for [introspection and for] grieving, a slow process. We learned about the Yizkor service as a place and time for remembrance. And during Shabbat services and conversations with our clergy, we learned that our Temple was a place that allowed us to be ourselves.”

My friends, there are times... there are times that we *have* helped each other remember *this* reason we are here, to hear the Voice, to ask the Big Questions. It is almost never *at* a funeral, but sometimes later, as the shadows recede. It is almost never at a Bat Mitzvah, but, sometimes later, as memory makes the trees of training fade into a forest. It comes up in a glimpse, a tangent in a class, a conversation in a hall, a sudden peek of perspective. It doesn't happen often anywhere. But it happens here. Because *that* is what *here* is for.

And because that is what here is for, I promise to make a place, to find the space, to be here for you in a way you might not have considered. Listen, we postpone it, we defer, we demure... but eventually we find the time for an annual “physical.” Friends: we should be, this can be the place to which we can turn for an annual “spiritual” as well.

When we come together in openness to wonder and to one another, we make more than an institution. We meet to make a place for the journey of the soul, where nagging questions can become a spiritual quest. We come together to make a holy community where the Oneness of God and the worthiness of humanity meet.

Life is a mystery, a game to uncover hidden rules and treasure. The game comes in different versions.

There is a Jewish version of the game. This is what it says:

One: No matter what happens *to us*, there is something precious *in us*.

We *have* power. We are God's partners.

Two: We live in a world wide web. There is a unity in the universe.

Three: The "universe" begins with "u""n""i". Our task is to make that unity real in our lives with other people.

That is what we can learn in here. And live out here.

L'shanah Tovah. And Shabbat Shalom.