

**Sanctity and Sublimation:
Losing Oneself and Discovering the World
Parashat Vayeitzei; November 8, 2013**

All religious traditions answer some questions very well. As an example, if you happen to be a repentance murderer, some forms of Christianity, as I understand it, has a better answer than many other faiths. The story is told of a minister who visited Eichmann in prison, in Israel, just before his execution. He was, at least as I heard it, confronted, upon his exit from the visit, by an Israeli reporter who was a Holocaust survivor. A verbal exchange occurred, of which, for our purposes at the moment, I will only share the first part. “So, will Eichmann go to heaven?” the reporter asked the minister. Now, I don’t know if Eichmann regretted his action at all, and perhaps this minister did not, either. But let’s imagine for a moment, in theory, that he did regret it, that he was completely contrite. It would be clear, then, that, at least in the versions of Christianity that place belief above all else, if repentance is sincere, if belief is pure, then, until the last, the very last moment God will be there for you.

Now, I know from my own reading and extensive discussions with Protestant intellectuals that a more sophisticated presentation of this theology would have enough nuance to handle the case of a monstrous mass murderer who came to God at the end of his life. But not every minister is a sophisticated theologian, and the story of this encounter presents this, simpler version of the faith. In this instance, the message was that God will be there for you no matter who you are. No matter what you have done.

I am not so sure the same thing can be said of Judaism. There are hints of this in places, for we have inherited a vast and complex tradition, but by and large, for us, repentance depends upon making up for what you have done. In some cases, murder among them, there is no restoration possible, at least at an earthly level that we can comprehend. I always wonder, as a Jew, about those who say they have “forgiven” criminals who killed their loved ones. I remember Bud Welch, saying this before the execution of Timothy McVeigh, who took away Welch’s daughter in the Oklahoma City bombings. I was glad for Mr. Welch, that he was able to move on with his life. But, at another level, I was bothered by the reference to “forgiveness.” After all, the father was only one of the ones affected by the act. And no one can know... whether the daughter would offer similar forgiveness.

What would Judaism say to a repentant murderer? That is a tale for another time.

Let us turn to a different tradition. Buddhism, I believe, answers another question very well. Why is there suffering in the world? We suffer, we are taught, because of our attachments. We grow attached to what is. But everything changes. And that causes pain. The answer, then, is to step back from our attachments, to cut the ties that bind and burn, to withdraw not from involvement, not from caring for others, but from some deep level of psychic entanglement.

At least in this admittedly outsider's and oversimplified view of Buddhism, it seems quite different from Judaism. We are, if anything, an extraordinarily entangled people, emphasizing the worth and dignity of the self, allowing for fulfillment and individuality as part of our religious expression.

And yet there are hints, in our own spiritual inheritance, of a different viewpoint. In the Chasidic world, touched, perhaps, by a whif of Eastern influence, there grew the concept of "*bitul hayeish*, the nullification of the self," in order to more fully surround oneself, immerse oneself in the Divine. And the notion is found nowhere more powerfully, I believe, than in a reaction to one part of one verse, in this week's portion.

It is, of course, the Led Zepplin portion, the stairway to heaven. Jacob uses a rock for a pillow, and has a vision from the beyond. A young man is alone and afraid, and he is assured of spiritual companionship, and physical prosperity. He wakes up in the morning and declares: "*Achen, yesh A' bamakom ha'zeh, v'anochi lo yada'ti*. Behold, God is in this place, and I, I did not know it."

There are so many things to say about this verse, but I want to focus on a less obvious lesson, a hidden hint folded into the wrinkles of Hebrew grammar. Because there is a word here which is not needed. It is the word "*anochi*." "I." It is redundant. The phrase "*lo yada'ti*" already means "I did not know." Why, therefore, the extra "I."? The assumption of our tradition is that God wrote the Torah, and that anything extra, anything unusual was ready-

made Divinely-planted material, to mine for meaning. What does the extra word add? What might we learn from it?

Shlomo HaKohen Rabinowitz was the first rebbe of the Radomsk Chasidic dynasty, in Poland, and, according to the sources I checked, was one of the great Chasidic masters of the 19th century. In his classic work, *Tiferet Shlomo*, he wrote the following about this verse:

אם באמת יש כאן השראת השכינה, אם השריתי את הקדושה במקום הזה, הרי זה בגלל - "ואנוכ ילא ידעתי" - שבטלתי את היש בי, את האני שלי, ולא ידעתי מכל אנוכיות, מכול שמץ של כוונה עצמית. אלא הכל למען שמו יתברך, לשם יחוד קודשא בריך הוא ושכינתה.

If, truly, the Shechina, the indwelling Presence of God dwells here, if I have dwelled with/invoked holiness in this place, it is because "My I, I did not know," that I nullified/obliterated the essence of myself, my individuality, my identity and self-awareness, and consciousness of ego, any trace of self-intention. Rather, everything was now for the sake of the Holy One itself, in the name of unifying the holiness within all being and its presence.

What happened in this place, to Jacob? What can happen, to each one of us? There are moments in time and space, when we lose ourselves. When we get over ourselves. When we are one with the moment, the mission, the mandate, so in touch with the essence of who we are with or what we are doing that we lose our awareness of self, when the ego is subsumed, the nattering noises of consciousness are quiet.

Do you know that feeling? When has it happened to you? What is it like?

The Chasidim call this, as I said, *bitul haYesh*, the nullification, indeed, perhaps, the annihilation of the self. And it is only here, they assert, that we can know “*achein, yesh Adonai baMakom haZeh!* Behold, God is in this place.”

In the search for transcendence, the present presence, the persona, the ego only gets in the way. “We” are left behind when we truly look “beyond.” Light blinds, but in the darkness something different shines. Eyes adjust, when the “I” of the ego fades away. The slaying, the murder not of others but of our own awareness... that is what reveals... what else surrounds us... all the time.

Lose the self, to discover the soul. Be silent, the working week. Be still, the beating heart. In the quiet, in the silence, in stepping into nothingness you will find everything.

Shabbat Shalom.