

MORNING LIGHT COME, THE JOURNEY TO ONE

From Fear to Understanding, From Hate to Love

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It was probably about four a.m., darkness just beginning to soften toward day, though that would vary with place and time of year. Shadowy streaks marking pathways above, holes in the sky where earlier stars had been. I wasn't there at that moment, but I have been there, as you have, peering through darkness toward the morning light. I don't know what experience underlies the telling, an encounter real or hypothetical? Does it matter? Why was someone out at that hour? Where from and where to? Did it seem to be an apparition approaching, just another shadow along the road? Was there fear, a tightening in the throat? Or, perhaps, there was a flutter of hope, another traveller on the way, not to go on alone, but to walk with another toward the dawn.

The journey to One begins with a question. The very first word of the Mishna, of the entire Talmud is מאימתי /from when? Having already asked from when may we say the evening Sh'ma, the rabbis now ask: מאימתי קורין את שמע בשחרית? /From when may we say the morning Sh'ma? The answers are not given in measures of time, but in the degree of light needed to delineate between the familiar and not so familiar, or to distinguish between but shades of difference. In the dawning light of recognition, it is about whether we can see both similarity and difference. Only when we can recognize difference, have we arrived at the time in which we are ready to affirm Oneness.

מאימתי /From when may we say the morning Sh'ma? From when a person can distinguish between תכלת ללבן /blue wool and white wool. Rabbi Eliezer says, from when a person can distinguish between blue wool and wool dyed the color of leek. Rabbi Meir says, from when a person can distinguish between a wolf and a dog /זאב לכלב. Rabbi Akiva says, from when a person can distinguish between a donkey and a wild ass. ואחרים אומרים /But others say: משיראה את חברו רחוק ארבע אמות וכירנו /From when a person can see their friend at a distance of four *amot* (approximately six feet), and recognize them.

The question is, who is one's friend, and who are the "others?" Let's take the latter

question first. In the context of legal discourse, when the Talmud refers to an opinion without attribution, it is assumed to be the opinion of the other rabbis who are gathered as part of the discussion. There are rich layers of meaning in the presence of the "others" and in the word itself. We are reminded of the importance of what others have to say. All opinions are recorded in the Talmud, whether accepted or not, each one important to the process of learning and of deciding matters of law and life. There is a particular irony in the presence of the "others" in this discussion and in what they have to say. While the rabbis were engaged in a practical halachic/legal debate, the richness of the imagery brought by the "others" in determining a moment in time could not have been missed. Beyond the mundane, skeins of wool, dogs and wolves, donkeys and wild asses, the law is fixed when the human element is introduced, when similarity and difference, and the possibility of metaphor, are of greater importance and consequence. This discussion is quite literally about our ability to see the other in the process of affirming Oneness, in the gathering light of a new day.

We return to the first question, who is one's friend? The ירושלמי / the Jerusalem Talmud, as opposed to the more frequently referenced Babylonian Talmud, says it is not one's close friend encountered on the way. A close friend is likely to be recognized regardless of darkness and distance. Nor is it someone never seen before, who even closer at hand would not be recognized. The friend referred to, says the ירושלמי, is someone who has been seen in passing, but is not known. An earthy example is given, such as someone passed while coming and going from the tavern. A friend, we learn, is not necessarily someone with whom we already have a close relationship, but someone with whom we have the possibility of a relationship. Every person is passingly familiar, each in their own way carrying the image of God. The word חבר / friend means in its root, "bound together, connected." At the moment of night meeting day, the underlying connection, that we are bound together in human destiny, is brought to awareness. The other is illuminated.

The Talmudic teaching, so rich in its imagery, fills me with both hope and sadness. I imagine hands reaching in the moment of meeting, "come, let's go on together." I believe that the morning will come, but dawn seems so far off these days. מאימתי קורין את שמע בשחרית / From when may we say the morning Sh'ma? From the time when we can see the image of God in each other. In the Oneness of God, in Whose image all people are created, all people are one. The Sh'ma is a radical expression of belief in the oneness of humanity, to which we are meant to bear witness in its saying, even as we bear witness to the oneness of God. This is one of the most overlooked elements of Jewish faith and obligation. It is the "kavannah," the intention, that we need to bring to our own saying of the Sh'ma. And with eyes uncovered, blinking in the morning light, to then go out into the world and make it real.

Morning light come, the journey to one; from fear to understanding, from hate to love. But how shall we go? I have felt paralyzed in my own thinking, exactly what we can't afford to feel. And so I think it has been for many good people these days, with hate rife in the land. I have recalled my first encounter with vicious hate, and in its face that numbing sense of paralysis and confusion, and of an inner transformation quietly taking root in response. Through much of the school year following my Bar Mitzvah, I would walk from my junior high school to the post office in the center of town. In front of the one symbol of the federal government, I stood in a vigil of two, a young innocent and a Christian minister. It was 1964, in the midst of the civil rights movement, another time of vicious hate and visionary hope. We held signs urging passage of the Voter Registration Bill, "Let Everyone Vote! Write Your Congressman Now!" It would still be several years, with the emergence of the Women's Movement that liberated all of us, until I realized that congress was not meant to be a place only of men. A mock-up of the sign I held, a small piece of paper clipped to a tongue depressor, somehow saved through all these years, sits on a shelf in my study. From passing cars and pedestrians, I heard things that year I had never heard before, words for Blacks and for Jews, for body parts, all meant to degrade. I was embarrassed to ask, unable to repeat what I heard. I was ashamed, not for myself, I knew that what I was doing was right, but for these people, many of whom I had seen at least in passing, in our small town. In those volleys of hate, innocence was shattered. I had no idea how to respond, so I continued to stand quietly. As seasons turned one to another, I came to realize the meaning of perseverance and of witness, that our standing stood for something in addition to the message on our signs. Realizing that our continued presence was its own message, I became less afraid and less confused. While I could not have put words to it at the time, as resolve for the cause increased, so did a sense of compassion for those who could not see the morning light.

Whether of Israelis or Palestinians, of Jews or Muslims, or of immigrants, or of gays and lesbians, or of those transgender or queer, it has been a season of hate, chilling amid summer's heat. We have seen callous disregard for the image of God in other human beings in the Arizona immigration law, and directed at children of the undocumented in efforts to amend the fourteenth amendment that grants citizenship to anyone born on American soil. The seemingly endless effort to stop equal marriage in the name of the American family wears on and wearies the hand that holds high the scales of justice. In Florida, the Quran is to be burned on 9/11 by so called Christians. Such a conflagration of hate is unbearable, even as it threatens to spread to the dry tinder in the narrow alleys of confused hearts and minds. Nazis burn books. As we know only too well in our Jewish souls and psyches, the burning of human beings follows, each one a book of life. Heinrich Heine warned in 1821, long before the Holocaust, when ash of autos-dafe still floated above the skies of Europe; "Where they burn books, they will finally also burn people." It has all risen to a dissonant crescendo in the firestorm that surrounds the proposed building of an Islamic cultural center and mosque near to Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. In Boston, in the Jewish community, there has come once again this

summer, from the same lexicon of intolerance, the rhetoric of fear and derision that whether intended at the outset or not quickly becomes hate.

In the collective acknowledgment of sin on Yom Kippur, as we knock gently on our heart's door that it might open with compassion, ...דברנו דופי, בגדנו, אשמנו, the last lines, as translated in our Machzor, are of especial importance this year; תעבנו, תעינו, תעתענו / we are xenophobic, we yield to evil, we are zealots for bad causes. May we not be guilty of such sins, even through the complicity of silence. An expression of commitment, such collective recitation is in the spirit of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's admonition, "In a democracy some are guilty, all are responsible." Publicly acknowledging what has occurred in the world around us and among us, we take responsibility to draw out the poison and heal the wounds these sins have injected into the body politic of America and into the Jewish community. תעתענו / led astray, deceived. Through fear, otherwise good people are led astray to the path of zealotry.

In what has been an ongoing controversy concerning the new mosque in Roxbury, officially called the "Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center," this summer has seen how fear turned into hatred of the other turns inward against one's own as well. Following a visit by Governor Patrick to the mosque to address Muslims from across the state, a gubernatorial candidate attacked him for "pandering to terrorists." At an interfaith gathering to condemn those remarks, a rabbi offered a prayer and for that was attacked in the pages of the Jewish Advocate by those who oppose engagement. A letter in support of a colleague was then published, signed by seventy rabbis. In what was clearly an orchestrated campaign to intimidate, signers of the rabbinic letter were flooded with emails. As a signer of the letter, and in response to an op-ed piece I wrote that was published in the Advocate, I received dozens of emails. Though far from the young innocent hearing invective from passing cars, as the adult he became I was nevertheless shocked by the vitriol of statements such as these:

Please, make no mistake on reason: Muslims are not your friends, Islam does not respect your religion and Imams will not reciprocate when you need help.

Please, I beg of you, stop your "holier than thou" attitude toward those who DO mean you harm. Do not turn the other cheek, but rather face your adversaries fully on, face to face, eyeball to eyeball, with strength and determination, and say NEVER AGAIN.

Dear Loving and Highly Spiritually Evolved Progressive Rabbis, you're always yammering about dialoguing with "the other," right? So here's an "other" you might try dialoguing with: any Jew who has an ounce of sanity.

You will burn in hell, but unfortunately your sheepish, ignorant, trusting congregations will

also perish because of your naivety, ignorance and stubborn Jewish delusional DNA genes.

Such fear, such hate, dialogue with the other who is us the most challenging. In moments of rueful reflection, I think of the rabbinic saying, *כל ישראל חברים* / All Israel are friends. As painful in its irony as it is for us, it was undoubtedly more fantasy than a reflection of reality for the rabbis as well. In sobering contradistinction, these same teachers of the Talmud taught that the Second Temple was destroyed due to *סינת חינום* / baseless hatred among the Jewish people. Beyond acknowledging hateful attitudes among our own people today, even as the same attitudes sweep across the land, where does our response begin? As we rise to knock on our heart's doors to let compassion in, that can be the beginning of our response to hate, even our own. Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, noble soul and exemplar of his role, offered an anti-dote to *סינת חינום*, calling on us to replace baseless hatred with *אהבת חינום* / baseless love.

Rav Kook's insight into the relationship of the human soul and human society is breathtaking. Whether the innermost place is understood as soul or psyche, the fear we carry within becomes the source of external conflict. In that recognition, Rav Kook finds a common human denominator from which flows a wellspring of hope. Teaching that baseless hatred and baseless love share a common root, Rav Kook writes: *When conflict erupts between force and force, between person and person, between people and people, between world and world, it derives in essence from a perceived threat to self-identity.... The true source of hate comes from our 'otzar hachaim,' our inner resource of life. This fundamental life-force pushes us to live and thrive, and opposes all that it views as different and threatening. Ultimately, our hate is rooted in sinat chinam — groundless and irrational animosity, just because something is different.* As a call to a way of acting in the world, Rav Kook then offers his famous teaching: *If we were destroyed, and the world destroyed with us, due to baseless hatred, then we shall rebuild ourselves, and the world with us, with baseless love/אהבת חינום.* (Rav Kook quotes from *Orot HaKodesh*, vol. 3, ch. 10, translations my own and from Chanan Morrison.) Rav Kook describes so much of what ails America today, fear of difference and perceived threat to identity, through which we ironically then lose that which is the deepest and most noble expression of our identity as Americans.

In truth, Rav Kook did not believe that there was such a thing as "baseless love." The presence of the image of God in the other, the fact of being human, was sufficient grounds for love. Not baseless, and not without purpose, such love is meant to touch the heart of the other and awaken new awareness and recognition. These were not simply words for Rav Kook, but a way of being in relation to others. Once while walking home, Rav Kook was set upon by extremists who drenched him with waste water because they disagreed with his openness to secular Jews. In spite of what had been done to him, Rav Kook rejected the urgings of others to press charges, expressing

instead a love for the humanity even of his assailants.

From a context worlds apart, in a very different time and place, Rav Kook's teaching of אהבת חינום/baseless love is reminiscent of Rev. Martin Luther King's teaching that we don't have to like everyone, but we need to love them. Rev. King warned in "Strength to Love" that we are "traveling along a road called hate...; that love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend...; that fear is mastered through love" ("Strength to Love," chapters 5 and 12). Drawing from a common source in the One Who is the Source of Life, there is a soul connection through time among all who would teach the ways of nonviolent social change and conflict resolution. We sometimes forget the Jewishness of such teachings of love and transformation, rooted in our own sources of wisdom. "Who is a hero of heroes?," Rabbi Natan asks, "One who makes a friend of an enemy / מי שעושה שונאו אוהבו."

In our own sources, in our journey through these days of renewal, planted in our own hearts, there is beautiful teaching and encouragement to draw from if we would transform fear to understanding, hate to love. An enemy does not become a friend unless treated like a friend. The way of nonviolence is more clearly understood and practiced in regard to direct action, when facing down injustice, seeking with perseverance to change unjust laws. The way is more difficult and elusive when the goal seems amorphous, when it is to create a more just and caring society through the changing of attitudes. In the way of Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. King, and reflected in the thought and person of Rav Kook, that in fact is where social change begins, in the changing of attitudes, the changing of people. The two ways go together. There is no change without struggle, without social and political activism. And there will be no change unless the way reflects the goal, changing people in the process. Without the soul force of which Gandhi speaks, without love of the other as a human being, however vile their actions or beliefs, there will be no change. That is why it is so difficult, especially so when the goal is more amorphous, because it depends on each one of us. Nonviolence does not work as a tactic, unless there is genuine desire to win over the other in the process, to make a friend of an enemy.

In this time of fear become hate sweeping the land, alone and together we listen to fears and respond with love, our resolve to bring change no less for love. Creating alternate realities, of relationships with Muslims and with those who fear Muslims, offering in full view a vision of what can be. Supporting all who in the uniqueness of their difference suffer for the fears of others, the goal is to replace hate with love. We are called to be the messengers of what can be, in the ways of every day, in the places we work and in the tone of demonstrations meant to call attention to trodden rights and noble ideals. I speak and wrestle from my own despair, from my own effort to find a way to infuse activism with a love that includes all.

The Tzanzer Rebbe tells of two people lost in a forest and happening upon each other. Wandering for days, neither has found the way. Each knowing a way not to go, they join hands and search for the way out together. In the brittle atmosphere of lower Manhattan, beneath skies that weep and crackle with tension, I do know a way not to go. It is the way described by a reporter witnessing opposing demonstrations: "There were no reports of physical clashes, but there were some nose-to-nose confrontations, including a man and a woman screaming at each other across a barricade under a steady rain." Arguing nose-to-nose will do nothing but allow for an exchange of germs, thereby giving us all the same illness. Though some with signs and sentiments that are vile and vicious, it does not help to join them in the mud. To those of genuine pain, who see dissonance in the presence of a mosque, reminding them we are Americans all, reaching out with open hand and heart; toward both may we find the "strength to love."

In the shadow of its horror, day was turned to night. The smoke and ash, the hate, still we journey toward the dawn. At times in the darkness, feeling our way, we lose sight of who we are, becoming the worst expression of America and of our Jewish selves, old fears and hatreds among us given chance to rise, the most noble to reclaim in the morning light. Upon the Liberty Bell, words of Torah inscribed, "You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all its inhabitants." And upon the "New Colossus," the Jewish voice of Emma Lazarus, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Of 9/11, to honor the dead, creating a society whose love for the other is for each and every one; from all the lands and ways we have come, a multi-faith tapestry, each strand's beauty needed to shine, none of the peoples and faiths that weave America to be conflated with the worst of their own. It is for all of us to be the best of who we are. מאימתי קורין את שמע בשחרית? / From when may we say the morning Sh'ma? From when in the gathering light of a new day, we shall recognize a friend where none had been before, and walk on together toward the dawn.