

"I'm in it, Tears and All"
 A Theology of Engagement with the World and Each Other
 Rosh Hashannah 5777
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To the beat of a marching drum of joy, we made our way through Boston Common, song carried on the summer breeze, "gonna keep on walkin', gonna keep on talkin' on to the freedom land..." A long ago memory alighted as we passed the band stand where he spoke, a march led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. when I was fifteen years old, wending through the streets of Roxbury to this same green ground. The human heart beating as one in the cadence of the drum, we keep on walkin', keep on talkin' on to the freedom land. We gathered there at the State House in all our rainbow colors and ways of being to sing and pray and speak of truth to power. Earth and people, so many needs all joined as one, we came dancing and singing to declare a higher moral ground.

The Movement for a Higher Moral Ground began in the Black Churches of the south. Beyond right and left, liberal and conservative, it seeks to reclaim the place of religion as a way of cohesion rather than separation, a lens through which to see more clearly all that denies the very essence of creation and of what this world is meant to be. Drawing on the wellsprings of many faiths, of people seeking and learning together, all are encouraged to reclaim the texts and teachings of their own faith that unite rather than divide, that heal rather than harm. In the landscape of religion and politics, in whose chasms strident voices echo, the challenge is to hear the still small voice that reminds of that essence, only to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

Gathered in front of the State House on that day designated as "Moral Monday," the issues were many, but they were all as one, so much that is hurting people and earth. People shared stories of brokenness and hope, all of the issues refracted through the lives of real people. I thought of the verse in *Kohelet* / *Ecclesiastes* that we will read in a few weeks during Sukkos, a time of homecoming, of seeking shelter together in a fragile booth, *But I returned/v'shavti ani and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold -- the tears of the oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter* (*Kohelet* 4:1). In the struggle of the rabbis to comprehend so many needs and so much pain, their struggle becoming ours, God speaks through the *midrashic* tellings of the rabbis and says in response to *Kohelet*, *alai l'nachaman/it is upon Me to comfort them*. For we who would walk in God's ways, as we are commanded to do, it is also upon us to be comforters, to lightly touch the burdened shoulder of another and to be a vessel for their tears.

With powerful words of grace and beauty lingering in the air, telling of all the oppressions that are done under the sun, not enough to see, but challenged then to do, we blessed and sent off a delegation to deliver to the governor the Higher Ground Moral Declaration. And then we began to spread out in walking vigil around the State House. As we walked, I found myself alongside an African American man whose collar told me he was a minister. I held out my hand and introduced myself, as he extended his hand to me. "Hi, I'm Ron Odom," he said with a smile. Our hands still clasped, his name took my breath away, for a moment unsure of what to do or say. I placed my other hand on his shoulder, "I'm sorry," I said, "I'm so sorry," speaking as to a mourner in the freshness of grief, and so it shall always be for him. In the sharing of names, there came a meeting of worlds, his and mine, the outer world that holds so much pain enveloping his inner world and its sorrow, all as one. We walked on quietly for a time. I did not want to ask questions, to press him to say more than he might wish to; nor did I want to speak at all and break the silence that joined us. Holding all the pain of the world as we walked, each of us still hearing the litany of oppressions just recited, he began to share his own pain. He spoke of that October day in 2007 when Steven died, his precious thirteen-year old son, shot dead steps from their home. He recounted the details that had been so much in the news, now in his own voice, hearing the shots, rushing outside, Steven's basketball rolling down the sidewalk and stopping at the tire of their own family car. I cried softly as he spoke, his heart opening to a fellow traveler on life's journey who was a stranger no more. And then he said with such resolve, "I'm in it, tears and all. Our weakness is our strength."

I can't imagine what it is like to go on when one's world so implodes. I keep hearing Rev. Odom's words though, realizing how much they speak to all of us and to the human condition, "I'm in it, tears and all. Our weakness is our strength." It is a profound and courageous expression of commitment and connection. We are all weak at times, all hurting, and so we are joined with others on the common ground of humanity, our weakness becoming our strength in its ability to join. Together, we are the beating heart of the world and we need each other as part of one body, beating as one | in the ca | dence | of the drum, "gonna keep on walkin', gonna keep on talkin' on to the freedom land...." Somehow we go on, doing our best to "keep on keeping on," whether with pain so fierce or of that which comes of simply living in this world. Working to heal the pain of the world can become a balm for the pain in our own lives. Of worlds entwined, so too the work we do to heal our own pain can flow out into the world as a healing river. The main thing, as Rebbe Nachman teaches, is not to be afraid, and so not to allow the hurt we carry to block us from each other, as, God forbid, a blockage in the arteries of our body can stop the heart in its beating. "I'm in it, tears and all" speaks of a determination to stay engaged, not to back away. As weakness becomes our strength, so too the common ground of joy in realizing we have each other, that we are not walking alone.

I have been corresponding with Rev. Odom since that day when our paths became one in circling the State House for the sake of all. We plan to meet to talk and share after the holidays. In walking together, we found deep connection in the not so random ability of people to engage with each other. That becomes a hope beyond individuals. At the bottom of his emails is a quote from Rev. King that I had never heard before. It is from the earliest known recorded sermon of Dr. King, discovered only recently, words delivered on February 28, 1954. In a sermon called "Rediscovering Lost Values," Dr. King writes, "If we are to go forward today,

we've got to go back and rediscover some mighty precious values that we've left behind. The first principle of value that we need to rediscover is this: that all reality hinges on moral foundations...."

In returning to our own sources and their "mighty precious values," it is more than to find single verses as support for one position or another, though single verses add up to reflect a deeper ethos. Returning to the wellsprings, it is to discover an intricate web of teaching that reflects the intricate web of life, all strands joined as one, reminding us that, indeed, "all reality hinges on moral foundations." Turning back in order to go forward is the dynamic of *t'shuva*, the way of turning and returning that is at the heart of these days. Seeking those moral foundations upon which all reality hinges, we can see *t'shuva* as the first step in a *Theology of Engagement with the World and Each Other*.

Of moral foundations, there is at the very beginning a wholeness that cries out against all that violates it. All of creation begins with a gentle breath upon the water, *ורוח אלקים מרחפת על פני המיִים / ru'ach Elokim m'rachefet al p'nei ha'mayyim/and the breath of God hovered over the face of the waters*. Rosh Hashannah celebrates that day of beginning and therefore the renewal of its gentle spirit. Each time the shofar is sounded during the *Musaf* service, we call out, *היום הרת עולם / ha'yom harat olam/today the world is conceived*. It seems clear when and what we are celebrating, the creation of the world on Rosh Hashannah, the first day of the month of Tishrei. There is a fascinating teaching, however, that in adding delicious confusion also adds a deeper sense of wholeness and connection with ourselves, with each other, and with the world. In an ancient *midrashic* work called *P'sikta d'Rav Kahana*, Rabbi Eliezer teaches that the world was created on the twenty-fifth of the month of Elul, that this was the beginning of the creation of the world. An intrinsic connection is made between human and earth, *אדם / Adam* and *אדמה / Adamah*. In the Torah's sequence, the human appears on the sixth day of creation. The first of Tishrei is six days from the twenty-fifth of Elul. Of this very day in which we are gathered, therefore, Rabbi Eliezer teaches, *בראש השנה נברא אדם הראשון / b'Rosh Ha'shannah nivrah adam ha'rishon/the first human was created on Rosh Ha'shannah*. A later commentator makes it clear, *ישבו נגמר העולם / she bo nigmar ha'olam*. We are of the earth and the earth is of us, all humanity rooted in one human being formed in the womb of earth, human and world celebrated today as one.

With breathtaking sensitivity, Maimonides wrote in the twelfth century of an inherent wholeness among people with each other and people with the earth. It remains as a cry of the heart, a plea waiting to be heard, a teaching of theology waiting to be lived. In his *Moreh N'vuchim/Guide for the Perplexed* (1:72), Rambam wrote: *Know that this Universe, in its entirety, is nothing else but one individual being: that is to say, the outermost heavenly sphere, together with all included therein, is as regards individuality beyond all question a single being like Said and Omar....* Note the natural sense of connection in his reference to people of Muslim names, those among whom he lived, here representing all people, a lesson in itself from his time to ours. Rambam goes on: *If for one instant the beating of the heart is interrupted, a person will die,*

and all their motions and powers come to an end. In like manner would be the death of the whole universe, and everything therein would cease to exist if the spheres were to come to a standstill.... You must therefore consider the entire globe as one individual being which is endowed with life, motion, and a soul. This mode of considering the universe is... indispensable... for demonstrating the unity of God; it also helps to elucidate the principle that the One who is One has created only one being.

The human heart beating as one in the cadence of the drum, we keep on walkin', keep on talkin' on to the freedom land. Sometimes it is so hard to keep going though, whether for brokenness within ourselves, for despair at how long there is yet to walk, for hurt caused by those with whom we walk, even by those with whom we gather in community. Some feel pushed away by the commitments of others. Sometimes we have to step back, needing time to gather thoughts, to soothe our pain, to dry the tears, but then to go on, to take the outstretched hand of another walking on the way. It is hard to imagine beyond the beauty of his words, how to affirm Maimonides' vision of such overarching wholeness, to live in real terms a Theology of Engagement with the World and Each Other. It is embarrassing to admit how hard it can be to live up to the inspiration of one who knows such pain each day and is yet able to say, "I'm in it, Tears and All." To remain engaged in spite of all is one of the great challenges of these days, these days of turning and the times in which we live. It is the challenge of *t'shuva* as a way of going through life, calibrating and recalibrating, turning and returning across the divides of our own making, returning to the wholeness envisioned at the beginning. We come to this time and place with our tears, with our heartache for the world, for ourselves, and for each other. And we sing with joy for the possibility of all that can be, for the beauty of this world in spite of all, and for our being here together.

Toward a greater healing and the fuller possibility of change, the veteran civil rights activist, teacher, and public theologian, Ruby Sales, asks, "where does it hurt?" She asked the question long ago of a young woman struggling with life. As the answer poured out in a stream of torment, Ruby Sales realized that this was the question that we each need to ask and be asked if we would heal the world and ourselves. As part of one body, earth and people organically entwined, each one's pain affects the entire organism. That wholeness underlies the rabbinic teaching that whoever destroys a single life, it is as if having destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves a single life, it is as if having saved an entire world (Mishna Sanhedrin, 4:5). Of a world saved and a world destroyed, in August, 1965, when Ruby was seventeen years old, she joined other SNCC workers trying to enter a white Alabama grocery store. When the gun was aimed, Jonathan Daniels, a white seminarian and freedom worker from Episcopal Divinity School here in Cambridge, leaped to push her out of the way. He took the bullet and was killed, a world destroyed. Devoting her life to healing wounds and saving worlds, Ruby holds the hurt and each day makes his memory a blessing.

There is so much that hurts these days, though perhaps it has always been the same. Timeless and universal themes remind us that we are one, that all people experience the same joys and sorrows, truths of love and loss reminding us that "our weakness is our strength." Unlike

at any other time, though, the earth is burning with fever today, endangering her children, joined as one, as with child at the breast. Beloved mother, dare we ask, "where does it hurt?"

As though still within her womb, ever becoming, first and sixth day of creation are joined today, היום הרח עולם / *hayom harat olam* / *today the world is conceived*, each of us sustained as one with earth and each other. Of children in Aleppo, dare we ask, "where does it hurt?" Of all who are seeking refuge from the storm, unless we open our doors, dare we ask, "where does it hurt?" In this election season, we need to ask those who feel disenfranchised and alone in their alienation, "where does it hurt?" We also need to be clear that one's own hurt does not justify the hurting or hating of others, or supporting of candidates who would do their hurtful bidding. It is our burden then, the question of how to ask and yet not to justify hate as the response. Where does it hurt...? It hurts in our own bodies when the bodies and lives of some are denigrated, when the fragile web of human connection is swept away, as with a verbal stick to a spider's web.

Of a web so strong, and tried at times, African Americans and Jews need to remember to ask each other, "where does it hurt?" Engagement does not just happen, it needs to be nurtured all along the way to freedom land. The black community is hurting so deeply, the body of humanity bleeding, worlds destroyed. Where does it hurt? Four more black people were killed by police in the last two weeks, three men and a child, thirteen year-old Tyre King, Terrence Crutcher, Keith Lamont Scott, Alfred Olango. Black Lives Matter is a desperate plea that is still set today against the backdrop of slavery. Black lives didn't matter at all then because property does not matter in the way of human beings. As a society, we are still trying to shake off the shackles that bind us to the racist legacy that begins in that time. Yes, the essential truth is that all lives matter, it's just that sometimes we forget and need to be reminded. I often wonder, what if there had been signs in Germany in the nineteen thirties, bravely placed in homes and churches, that said, "Jewish Lives Matter?"

African Americans and Jews share painful legacies of racism and anti-Semitism. Making it all real in the moment, from theory to practice, from theology as the study of God's word to the living of God's word, we are challenged to stay engaged with each other. If asked during the summer and continuing now, where does it hurt?, many Jews would share the heartache caused by the Platform issued by the Movement for Black Lives. A coalition of more than sixty organizations, the Movement for Black Lives is not synonymous with Black Lives Matter, a plea that stands by itself, waiting to be heard. A massive document, the Platform offers a vision and a way toward racial justice and the transformation of American society. Insensitive to the very intersection of oppressions that it seeks to hold, in addressing American foreign policy the Platform refers to Israel's occupation of Palestine as genocide. The occupation, grinding now toward fifty years, is relentless in the oppression and misery it brings to

the daily lives of Palestinians. The occupation is corroding the Jewish soul in the Land of Israel and dragging Jews in a direction that is not ours. But the occupation is not genocide.

Where does it hurt? To address the question honestly, we need to stay at the table, and at the vigils and marches and meetings, and not withdraw. Of one human body, we need to acknowledge the pain that comes from its different parts. The word genocide sparks fear for Jews, psychic fear of what happened once instilling fear for what we know in our bones could happen again. A nation guilty of genocide should legitimately be treated as a pariah state, one that in its essence is evil. As Israel represents the embodied presence of Jews in the arena of nations, however much we may differ among ourselves as to what that means, the charge of genocide can be felt as an attack on our collective body, stimulating pain that reverberates through each of our bodies, making less whole the body of humanity. A Theology of Engagement with the World and Each Other is not an abstraction, but of sacred sources reclaimed a way of going forward, of walking with each other.

To the beat of a marching drum of joy, we made our way through Boston Common, song carried on the summer breeze, "gonna keep on walkin', gonna keep on talkin' on to the freedom land..." It is not always a bright summer's day as we walk, moods and seasons turning and the years, but if we're gonna' get there, we need to walk together, the human heart beating as one in the cadence of the drum. Gathering all the hurt and hope in our own lives and in the world all around, daring to ask, "where does it hurt?", may we each have the courage to say, "I'm in it, tears and all."

May God give us the strength. Thank you and Shannah tovah.