

Ki Tavo' – Experiencing God

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Deuteronomy 26:1 - 29:8

“Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that Adonai did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country: the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet to this day Adonai has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” -

Deuteronomy 29:1-3

P'shat – Explanation

Here, at the end of forty years of wandering in the wilderness, as the Children of Israel are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses reminds them that their acceptance of God is not based on belief or faith, but on their direct experience of the Divine working in their lives. He tells them, “You have seen all that Adonai did before your very eyes,” because they have personally experienced the pain, exploitation, and oppression of slavery, as well as the exhilaration and joy of liberation and freedom. For an entire generation they lived a miraculous existence: eating every day without ever working or planting crops, drinking abundant water in the midst of a desert, wearing clothes and shoes that never wore out, and encountering the divine revelation at Mt. Sinai.

The Sages understood Moses' bafflement and frustration with the Israelites. Despite the many miracles that should have cemented their certainty about God's presence in their lives, still they acted as if their eyes hadn't seen, their ears hadn't heard, and their minds didn't understand; still they turned away from God at every opportunity.

How could the people remain theological skeptics when they themselves had experienced God first hand? What could be more powerful than that? All the subsequent prophets, Sages, and teachers could only teach and preach *about* God's miraculous presence, whereas even the lowest-ranked servant on the Exodus from Egypt directly experienced God's intervention. In the Midrash of the *Mekhilta, Shirata* 3, the Sages comment, "A maid-servant saw at the splitting of the Red Sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel and all the prophets never saw."

D'rash – Kaplan's Insight

"In religion as in all other manifestations of human life, there are three distinct states: experiencing, knowing, and understanding." – Mordecai M. Kaplan

Kaplan recognized that for religion to matter, belief in God must first be rooted in direct experiences of the sacred in our lives. One's "knowledge" of God could not be an intellectual process, but had to be an intimate, immersive experience grounded in life itself.

The Children of Israel had the privilege of God's "strong hand and outstretched arm" leading them from Egypt to the Promised Land. They could know God in the direct way only personal experience could have provided. They could also understand God intimately as the process through which compassion, justice, freedom, and other life-enhancing qualities become manifest in the world.

But it isn't always easy to make the transition from experiencing to understanding the meaning of our experiences. Kaplan recognized that every day we walk sightless through miracles. We wake in the morning to the miracle of life itself. We take for granted the miraculous intricate workings of our own bodies—the smoothly working autonomic nervous

system, the remarkable inner pharmacy that without our conscious thought makes sure we have exactly the right mix of oxygen, nitrogen, calcium, potassium, magnesium, and all that make our bodies function. Even when we not only recognize but directly experience this daily miracle, we usually fail to make the leap to the true understanding: Our experience of life itself surrounds us with the essence of what religion is all about – recognizing the godliness, holiness, and divinity that fill our lives every day.

Just as the Children of Israel failed to understand that their own personal experiences were all the proof they would ever need of the presence of God in their lives, we suffer the same lack of understanding in our own time as well.

D'rash – A Personal Reflection

Finding God in the Challenge of Parenting

Many parents feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities inherent in bringing a new life into the world and raising this child to become a successful, moral, contributing member of society. As in this passage from the Torah, they often feel as if no matter what they say or do, their kids act as if their eyes don't see, their ears don't hear, and their minds don't understand. They constantly wonder if they can really ever get through to their children.

Over the forty years in which I conducted parenting workshops throughout the United States, I always asked the audience of parents the same opening question: "Where do your values come from?" Without fail, 100% of the time, regardless of the religion, race, age, or geographic locale of the audience, the very first answer I would receive was always the same: "My parents."

From there I would ask everyone to identify one particular value or character trait they learned from their parents and write it on a board in front of the room. After compiling and

reading aloud what was inevitably an important list of fundamental values, I would follow up with this simple question: “How did your parents teach you these values?”

Again, without fail, the first response to this second question was always the same: “By example.”

“By example” is the automatic response for good reason. Whenever we stop to consider how we learned our own values, we realize that the best teacher is always personal experience. Children learn from watching and imitating (or not imitating) their parents. Albert Schweitzer once said, “Example isn’t the main thing in influencing others, it’s the only thing.” James Baldwin is said to have put it this way: “Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” A moral model is the most powerful tool we have for influencing the behavior of others, especially our children.

At this point, I would invariably reduce all the many complex theories of how to be a good parent to this simple but profound challenge: “Be the kind of adult you want your children to grow up to be.”

That’s it. Because all anyone can do is the best they can do. Ultimately, we have to have faith that “the best we can do” is good enough—that our children will be OK in the end.

Here, Moses and God may actually be our best parenting role models. If in this Torah passage even they can be frustrated by how often the Children of Israel ignore their teachings and examples of right behavior, how can we expect even more from ourselves?

All we can do is be the best role models we can, and have faith that because our children experience who we are every day, they will come to know and understand and embrace their own ability to make a difference in the world.

Rosh Hashanah

Sovereignty of God

You are my witnesses and I am God.

—Isaiah 43:12

D'rash: Kaplan's Insight

At the dawn of the New Year, the Jew is therefore encouraged not only to reevaluate his own personality and the society of which he is a member in the light of accepted ideals. He is also impelled by the message of the day which affirms the sovereignty of God, to bring his ideals themselves before the bar of judgment, and to examine them as to their adequacy in the light of whatever truth experience has revealed to him.

In discussing how the prayers and spiritual themes of Rosh Hashanah can be compelling and meaningful to the modern mind, Kaplan challenges us to “revalue” the tradition, or reinterpret traditional ideas into modern language. Kaplan’s idea of “revaluation” is based on his belief in a core of eternal ideas and ideals that are the essential truths of Jewish civilization. These, he teaches, will continue to be powerful and meaningful to Jews in every age, so long as they can be expressed in the language of the times and reinterpreted to be consistent with modern ethical sensibilities. So, for example, when it comes to the traditional idea of the “kingship of God”—one of Rosh Hashanah’s major theological and liturgical themes—Kaplan insists that we reevaluate our notion of God’s sovereignty from the concept of “kingship” to a more universally accepted divine ideal for human aspiration. He recognized that, in modern times, humans have replaced the earlier ideal of royal leadership with more democratic ideals. This contem-

porary social reality demands a rethinking of how we understand the notion of the “kingship of God” in new and modern ways as well.

Therefore, Kaplan teaches that the Rosh Hashanah liturgy challenges each of us to examine our own behavior as well as the ideals that motivated our actions over the past year in light of how we might have acted had we been true to our noblest and highest instincts. By understanding the “kingship of God” in terms of human aspirations at the loftiest level, we can transform the meaning of the traditional High Holiday liturgy to reflect our own search for the high ideals traditionally associated with godliness.

In other words, as Jewish tradition teaches, we can be God’s witnesses. When the prophet Isaiah quotes God as saying, “You are my witnesses and I am God” (Isa. 43:12), the Midrash explains that for the qualities we associate with God to matter in our world, it is up to us as human beings to manifest them. Thus, in *Sifrei Devarim* 346 it is written, “If you act as My witnesses, I am God, but if you do not act as My witnesses, I am not, so to speak, God.”

Kaplan also reevaluated the traditional notion of establishing the “Kingdom of Heaven” on Earth. “What is needed in modern life,” he wrote, “is a conception of God’s sovereignty that can function as an aid to the regeneration of society by direct human agency, without reliance on an illusory hope of miraculous intervention.”¹

Thus, Kaplan asserted, we are to use Rosh Hashanah as a day to hold ourselves up to the standards of our own truths, recognizing that furthering the universal ideals of justice, compassion, and equality requires human intervention in partnership with the qualities and values we associate with God.

D'rash: A Personal Reflection

THE BLESSING OF THE GRUMPY MORNING

Blessings come in so many different forms that most of the time they pass us by with little notice. We wake up grumbling and out of sorts

because we went to bed too late or had a fitful night and now we have to get our sleep-deprived selves to work on time or get the kids out of bed, cleaned, and fed so they will get to school on time. We sigh and pray for the day when we can sleep in, when the kids are off at summer camp or staying overnight at a friend's house, and it's our day off and work isn't relentlessly demanding our presence or attention. We cast a jealous eye on friends or family who are already free from the daily burdens we shoulder, who have taken early retirement or whose kids have left the nest. And then one day we get one of life's dreaded phone calls and have to face the stark reality that someone we love is dying—someone who won't be waking up to another hassled morning, who won't hear two siblings commence their hundredth fight over bathroom rights, who won't grumble about sleep deprivation ever again. Those are the moments when we discover the miracle of the ordinary everyday—what I have come to think of simply as the “blessing of the grumpy morning.”

I used to face many a grumpy Shabbat morning, waking much earlier than I would have wished in order to get to the synagogue, after the previous Friday night with services, *oneg*, and talking late into the evening. Even though I loved to lead services, each week I had to muster the energy and passion to officiate at yet another bar or bat mitzvah of another of the thousand families that made up my synagogue in Pacific Palisades.

What I learned along the journey of my life—especially during the ultimate annual challenge of leading my congregants each Rosh Hashanah to have a life-transforming encounter with the sacred—is the simple truth that every single day in our lives is a divine gift, grumpy or not. It is the realization that every morning is an irretrievable blessing that comes only once in a lifetime, today's opportunity to hold someone we love in our arms, to speak words of encouragement, to revel in the blessing of friends and family who care about us, to engage in work that helps give purpose and meaning to our lives. Every day is literally the only day we will live today, and as such each day is its own mini “New Year” over and yet again in our lives.

The “blessing of the grumpy morning” is the realization that every day I get to choose who I will be that day, and the quality of my life itself will be a direct reflection of the quality of my choices. In embracing the Jewish ideal of living my life as a witness to the Divine, I can reinterpret the traditional idea of the sovereignty of God as identifying the noblest ideas of Jewish civilization and fashioning my life today and tomorrow to meet them.