

The Two-Headed Turtle (June 2007)

(and life's other annoying distractions)

“Wait, wait,” Aviva said, “I want to show you something.” It was Parents’ Day at the Grove School, an opportunity to meet with faculty and staff as well as other parents and celebrate the accomplishments of our children. Aviva led us into the Science Room. “I want you to see this two-headed turtle. One of the kids found it in the field out back during a softball game.” It was a very small turtle, about the size you would buy for your child for a dollar at the local pet store.

I guess in biological terms this was something like a Siamese turtle. Joined at birth. There was just one shell with the normal four legs, but it had two heads—both stretched out of the shell, extending their necks in opposite directions. Turtles like this are apparently very much in demand. “Our science teacher told us that people will pay upwards of \$1500 for one of these,” Aviva said. I could see why. You don’t see a two-headed turtle every day. It’s like something you see in a carnival, or read about in Ripley’s. A “freak-of-nature,” some people might call this two-headed reptile. But I see it as a distraction, a divine slight-of-hand. It’s just a little game God plays with us. “Let Me see what I can do to throw them off-track,” the Holy One muses. Life—when it comes to spiritual exploration—is a graduate-level course.

One of the bigger blunders we can make when observing the universe is calling something extraordinary, because to do so would imply that there is a norm, that there is actually something ordinary. And while to the untrained eye most things in life seem to resemble their species’ counterparts, we would do well to appreciate that no two things are exactly alike—even identical twins. It’s just that most of our uniquenesses are less dramatic than having two heads sticking out of a button-down collar shirt (or tortoise-shell), and such obvious abnormalities (so-called) make us stop and take notice.

But as cool as this little turtle with two outstretched necks was, much more impressive was what I was to discover in the next room on our tour. “Here are the essays I wrote this year in Creative Writing Class,” Aviva said, directing us to a file box on a table. Sitting down, I took a few minutes to read one of her compositions. There are few things in life more gratifying than seeing the emergence of talent, especially when it is your child. “Aviva, now this is extraordinary,” I heard myself saying. “And so are you,” I said silently to myself not wanting to get too mushy. But she is. All our children are. As are we. And that’s the point.

Martin Buber writes: “Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique...for if there had been someone like him, there would have been no need for him to be in the world.” [The Way of Man, p.16] So when we note how extraordinary something or someone is, we devalue what we consider ordinary.

Conversely, when nature doesn't work the way we expect it to, when something happens out of (what we would call) the ordinary—like disease or natural catastrophes—we bemoan life's unpredictability, completely missing the miracles of daily life we so easily take for granted. We presume that our bodies will function well, not realizing that life's miracles are less about being rescued from illness and more about the fact that we actually get up each day. That our bodies work at all, that our hearts mysteriously form and start pumping is profoundly more remarkable and inspiring of awe than is the unavoidable reality that such miracles will one day cease.

This is why Judaism encourages us to praise the Creator each morning, to be grateful that our bodies continue to work and our souls remain to challenge us to be human. The miracle is in the routine, the common. And the tragedy is that most of us inhale and exhale each day of our lives hardly ever stopping to consider just how beautiful it is to breathe, or that the air we breathe is this miraculous God-given fuel that we only seem to value when it isn't as available as it used to be. The list goes on and on.

And to think we get excited over two-headed turtles. It's just a "side-show" in God's circus of the sacred.