

## HIGH HOLY DAY SERMON

VICTORIA – 5767

RABBI NACHMAN

I want to tell you a story.

There is a mountain. On the mountain, there is a stone.

From this stone flows a Spring.

Everything has a heart. Therefore, the world as a whole also has a heart.

The mountain with the stone and the spring stands at one end of the world.

The Heart of the World stands at the opposite end of the world.

The Heart of the World faces the Spring and constantly longs and yearns to come to the Spring.

It has a very, very great longing, and it cries out very much that it should be able to come to the Spring.

The Spring also yearns for the Heart.

The Heart has two things that make it weak.

First, the sun pursues it and burns it.

The second thing that weakens the Heart is the great longing and yearning that it constantly has toward the Spring. It longs and yearns so much that its soul goes out, and it cries out.

It constantly stands facing the Spring, and cries out, "Help!" desiring it so very much.

When the heart wants to rest a bit and catch its breath, a great bird comes out and spreads its wings over it,

protecting it from the sun.

It then can relax a bit. However, even when it is resting, it looks toward the Spring and yearns for it.

One may wonder, since it yearns for it so much, why does it not go to the Spring?

However, if it were to come close to the mountain, then it would no longer see the peak.

It then could not gaze at the Spring and, if it stopped looking at the Spring, it would die, since its main source of life is the Spring.

When it stands facing the mountain, it can see the peak upon which the Spring is, but as soon as it comes close to the mountain, the peak is hidden from its eyes.

If it could not see the Spring, then it would die.

If the Heart died, then the entire world would cease to exist.

The Heart is the life-force of all things, and nothing can exist without a heart.

The Heart, therefore, stands facing the Spring, yearning and crying out.

Time does not exist for the Spring.

The Spring is not inside time at all.

The Spring only has time because the Heart gives it as a gift for one day.

However, when the time comes for the day to come to a close, then at the end of the day, the Spring will not have any more time, and it will therefore die. This in turn would cause the Heart to die.

The entire world would then cease to exist.

Toward the end of the day, they begin to take leave of each other.

At that time, they begin to speak to one another  
in wonderful parables and lyrics with great love  
and tremendous desire.

The True Man of Kindness watches very carefully over this.

At the exact end of the day, the True Man of Kindness  
gives the Heart a gift of one day.

The Heart gives the day to the Spring,  
and the Spring then once again has time.

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I'd like you to take a moment to picture in your mind  
the image of the Heart at the center of the world,  
yearning for the Spring on the mountain peak far away.  
Think of the heart's beat, marking time as the day goes by.  
Think about the Spring, which exists beyond time,  
also yearning for the Heart.

Think of the desire and cries the Heart puts forth  
as it longs for the Spring.

Think about the impossibility for the Heart and the Spring  
to ever reach each other, because,  
the closer the Heart gets to the Spring,  
the more invisible the Spring becomes.

And, if the Heart cannot see the Spring, it dies,  
causing the death of the entire world.

Now picture the Man of True Kindness.

This man collects deeds of loving-kindness throughout the day.  
He then weaves these deeds into another day,  
which he gives to the Heart.

The Heart then gives this day as a gift to the Spring,  
so they can continue to yearn for each other for yet another day.

This poignant and beautiful story is one of the most famous tales  
in hassidic literature. Its author is Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,  
the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov— or  
Master of the Good Name— founder of the Chassidic movement.  
Rabbi Nachman was born in 1772 in Ukraine.

He grew to be an outstanding tzaddik, Torah sage, teacher and  
Chassidic master.

He conveyed his kabbalistic – or mystical teachings-  
through telling tales such as this one.

They are complex allegories meant to entertain as well as to  
reveal hidden meanings of the Torah.

Rabbi Nachman was explicit about his purpose  
in telling these stories:

To arouse people from their spiritual slumber.

Indeed, that is the purpose of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

As the great rabbi Maimonides puts it:

“Awake you slumberers ...”

So what in fact is aroused by Rabbi Nachman’s  
odd tale? No doubt, as I told the story,  
I elicited various responses in you.

Perhaps confusion was one.

But I think that the most basic feeling aroused by the story of the Heart and the Spring is that of desire, of yearning. And yearning is at the very basis of life itself, is it not?

Without desire, we would not do much in our lives other than stay in bed asleep.

On the most obvious level, our desire for the elemental comforts – food, sex, shelter -- drive us to function in the world.

Our desire to connect with other human beings causes us to fall in love, to have children, to maintain friendships.

Our desire for knowledge, for recognition, for power push us to participate in more elevated activities.

The impossibility of the Heart and the Spring ever meeting – just like the fact that Moses was never able to enter the Promised Land -- represents the limits of our achievements.

We can never fully be all that we want to be, our relationships are never as perfect as we'd like them to be, but our yearning keeps us from being satisfied with mediocrity.

The San Francisco Palace of Fine Arts is an eloquent monument to this reality. Surrounding the rotunda are urns atop columns into which women are weeping. And why are they weeping? For the imperfection of art which can never fully express all that the artist wishes to convey.

On a deeper, more spiritual level –  
and here's where Rabbi Nachman's kabbalistic,  
or spiritual teaching comes in –  
the Spring in our story represents God,  
the infinite, the timeless, the source of life --  
indeed, the ultimate mystery of life.

The Heart represents us, human beings,  
who yearn to connect with God,  
who yearn for immortality and eternity,  
who yearn to understand the nature of our existence,  
who yearn for truth.

For what is God, after all, but the source of this eternal mystery?

But, since we are finite beings,  
we can never achieve this merger with the divine,  
this understanding of what life is all about.

The unbridgeable gulf between the Heart and the Spring  
is a basic feature of Creation – of reality as we know it.

Distance from the primal source,  
and an intense, unending yearning, are a condition of our existence.

Now, this yearning is not static, but involves a kind of ebb and flow,  
in which we move back and forth, toward the transcendent  
and away from it, back to mundane reality.

We are able to achieve moments of spiritual high points –  
when we hear a powerful symphony, or witness a spectacular sunset,  
or when we succeed in praying with fervor.

At those times, our egos disappear,

and we experience transcendence,  
our entire beings lost in communion with beauty,  
the unity of the universe, or God.

But we cannot remain in that condition  
because we are made of flesh and blood,  
and our earthly desires and needs  
will inevitably pull us back to the world.

Nor should we remain in that state.

Judaism does not want our communion with God  
to make us forget about the world,  
but, rather, to make us more acutely aware of the need  
to repair the world. After all, the world is broken  
and we have the responsibility to help fix it.

A little background on the kabbalistic world view  
will make this clearer.

According to the kabbalists, God created the world  
by sending forth a ray of light. Vessels, called keilim,  
were supposed to contain the light,  
but the light was too intense and the vessels shattered.

From this cataclysm, "Holy Sparks" flew off in all directions,  
some returning to their Source, others falling into the world of "things"  
and "beings." Thus, as the Baal Shem Tov states,  
"In all that is in the world dwell Holy Sparks,  
no thing is empty of them; in the actions of men also,  
indeed even in the sins he does, dwell Holy Sparks of God."

The Kabbalistic notion of Tikkun Olam, or “Repair of the World,” is based on the principle that all things and actions in the world, no matter how seemingly trivial, are saturated with Holy Sparks, yearning to return to the state of premundane unity from which they fell at the creation of the world.

Our job is to collect these sparks and return them to their source. We do this by engaging in mitzvot – holy deeds or commandments – which release the sparks.

Rachel Adler has a beautiful prayer that conveys this idea:

### **On Redeeming Sparks**

The Kabbalists tell us that God  
In creating the world  
Took some of its fresh new light  
And poured it into each of the vessels of the  
spheres of the universe.

But such powerful light was stronger than the  
vessels,  
And so they weakened and cracked,  
While the precious light spilled out, falling down  
and down  
Through all the worlds  
Until they reached into the lowest world,  
Our own.

As the sparks of light fell down,  
They took on forms, and embedded themselves  
In physical things --  
Wood and water,

Plants and paper and living creatures.  
Always since that time  
The sparks yearn to return to the source of all  
light,  
The single, holy light from which they fell.

And so  
When we do a mitzvah with food or plants or paper  
or another human being,  
When we thank the Creator for having formed this  
beautiful and strong and fragrant thing,  
We awaken the spark of light within,  
And suddenly its fire starts to grow,  
And it rises, flaming higher and higher and higher,  
Soon to be reunited with its source.

As we have the power, through each mitzvah we  
do,  
To redeem the sparks of light from the tyranny of  
matter,  
In just such a way

God redeems us.  
Embedded by the tyranny of the Egyptians,  
We awoke to Adonay long centuries ago  
To rise to our highest destiny  
Of reunion with the divine.

And as each generation  
Is embedded in its time's own tyranny,  
So do we look toward the redemption  
Of the holy spark in each of us,  
Ready, each of us,  
When our redemption time shall come  
To soar further upward to the light from which we  
sprang  
And from which our beings draw their breath.

As we sing the song of the redeemed, standing  
jubilant upon the Red Sea's shore, we tune our  
mind, our body, our every sense to each song,  
each prayer, each gesture that we form,  
that we too may awaken every spark whose time it  
is to soar.

(Rachel Adler, revised by Richard N. Levy, from  
*On Wings of Awe*)

Back to our story.

Remember that in order for the world to survive,  
the Heart and the Spring must continually yearn for each other.  
They can only do this if they are given time.  
Time is given to them one day at a time,  
by the Man of True Kindness.  
The Man of True Kindness collects acts of loving-kindness and  
weaves them into a new day,  
which he gives to the Heart. The Heart, in turn,  
gives the day to the Spring  
so they can long for one another for another 24 hours.

Translation: Through God's grace, God created the world.  
But this creation is ongoing, renewed every day.  
The continuing existence of the world depends on human beings  
returning some of that divine abundance.  
We do this by performing deeds of loving-kindness.  
God is gracious to us if we are gracious to our fellow human beings.  
So, according to Kabbalah,  
it is through our holy deeds that we maintain the world in existence.  
It's really what our covenant with God is all about.  
The Torah is our guide for how we must behave.  
Indeed, for the Rabbis of our tradition,  
disobeying the Torah will result in the destruction of our universe.  
And what is Torah, if not treating our neighbor with kindness.  
Didn't Rabbi Hillel say that the whole Torah can be boiled down to:  
"What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone."  
All the rest is commentary.

Rabbi Akiba also said that, "The great principle of the Torah" (Sifra) is the precept: "Love your fellow as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).

So let's think about what we can do to keep the world going. If the True Man of Kindness were to come for his collection of deeds of loving-kindness here in Victoria, what would we offer him?

What was the last deed of loving-kindness you and I performed?

Did you visit someone in the hospital recently?

Did we give a dollar to a homeless beggar?

Did I acknowledge the waiter who served me lunch, looking into his face and recognizing a human being behind the uniform?

And did we express gratitude for the many gifts we receive on a continuing basis. The gift of life, of family; the spectacular nature surrounding this amazing island on which you live. Because gratitude is also an act of loving-kindness.

In this next year, let us endeavor to count our blessings, let us keep giving the heart and the spring another day to yearn for each other by performing random and volitional acts of loving-kindness – and as we go forth, let us also be kind to ourselves.

Turn to p. 69 for the Avinu Malkenu.

