

## ***Bonim: That's How People Really Are***

Two weeks ago, Dan and I woke up to a text message from our next door neighbors. It had been sent seven hours earlier. It said, "Hi Dan and Jade, sorry, you are probably asleep. But, we are out of town and just heard there was [water in the basement] 10 inches...Just checking if everything is OK at your place?" Dan jumped up and ran downstairs. A moment later he yelled up, "Jade... the couch is not where we left it."

You have surely read the devastating stories out of Queens. Dan and I joined our neighbors outside, all of us in our pajamas, shaking our heads in shock, helping each other to drag out soaked furniture, talking about how to safely dry out and re-start our hot water heaters, and who to contact for help. One shared that he was sitting in his basement watching TV when the water rushed in from everywhere. He ran upstairs to safety, but there was no stopping the several feet of water rushing into his home. Another, on the corner of the block, unable to open the basement door against the current, climbed out the window to save himself.

Thank goodness, Dan and I, and our dog were safely asleep two floors up. As we surveyed the damage that morning, we thought, thank goodness, this is just 'stuff'. Thank goodness we can afford to replace what we need. Thank goodness we have family to help us clean up, and figure out the systems to get the help we need.

Laying there on the floor, in front of our displaced couch, was a copy of the Plaut Torah Commentary. The one I use to locate the page numbers for the Havurah service each shabbat. I said out loud, "Why is this out here?" For, it was off the second shelf, out the office door, and around the corner from where I'd put it away. I picked it up and it was as if I had overturned a

gallon of water. I set it down and looked over the couch and through the door. The office floor was covered in every book that had once sat on the lower two shelves of our bookcases.

For my rabbinic thesis, I did a project on Psalms. For this project I collected translations of the psalms. Friends mailed them across the country. My advisor inscribed one. My mentor gifted me one written by her mentor who had passed away. I kept notes in all of them, filling margins and notebooks as I studied and recited them daily. All of them were on the bottom shelf.

I found my first book of Psalms, the one I used most often, neon green, orange and hot pink sticky notes peeking out of nearly every page. It was open and lying on the floor, facedown, its shiny purple binding glowing in the mud and wreckage. I picked it up and flipped it over. Water poured out of Psalm 26. Through the translucent paper, I could see the words of Psalm 27, "*Achat sha'alti*", on the next page. Just days before Rosh Hashanah, I was *one page* away from the words traditionally said in the days leading up to these Days of Awe. What a fitting metaphor for this moment.

How awe-inspiring would it have been for that book of Psalms to land right on Psalm 27--the traditional words of the season?! How easy would that have made the writing of this sermon?! So many times in our lives, we come so close to what we yearn for, and instead, we find ourselves struggling, in pain, never enough, aching, if only...We are behind a stuck, translucent page, right there, one turn away, one breath, one moment away.

*"Achat sha'alti m'eit Adonai o-tah avahkesh*--One thing I ask of the Eternal One, only that do I seek."<sup>1</sup> One thing. I am, we are all, perhaps, seeking just one thing. But what is it that we

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 27:4

seek? A 19th century commentator called The Malbim, teaches that, even though our desires change, there is just *one thing* that we *always* seek, as the Psalm continues, “To be close to God, all the days of our lives.”

But what does this mean? What does it mean to be close to God? The medieval commentator Radak suggests that that closeness to God, that one thing we seek, is true safety. Being saved from all trouble and all harm. Knowing peace that is eternal.<sup>2</sup> We yearn for miracles, to feel sheltered, as our prayers suggest, beneath God’s wings, in God’s embrace, to have our prayers heard. We want safety to come from God, to be absolute. But it doesn’t.

A few weeks ago, a member of our congregation shared a video<sup>3</sup> with me. It begins with a litany of all the things that are going wrong in 1969. All the ways, like today, that we are destroying our country, our world, each other and ourselves: War, violence, climate change, pandemic. We are more divided than ever. Unprepared. Fighting once again for rights that are basic: Choice, health, voting unobstructed, housing, work, education. In the video, in the midst of all that is wrong, the speaker, Neal, tells this story:

Neal and his dad are driving when their car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, 10 miles from a small town. A man in a truck pulls over and offers to tow them. His father says, “I don’t have cash, I can’t pay you.” The man says, “I wasn’t going to charge you.” So they all hop into the truck and the man tows the car into town. It’s a Sunday and everything is closed, but the man drives to the town mechanic’s house and knocks on the door. Neal’s father says, “I can’t pay you, I don’t have any cash.” The mechanic says, “Don’t worry, we’ll figure something out.”

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<sup>2</sup> Radak on Psalm 27:4

<sup>3</sup> Foard, Neil. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaMkOES-y3Y&t=25s>>

The mechanic looks at the car, but doesn't have the part he needs. So he goes to the home of the local auto parts store owner.

Neal's father, not believing that people could be this trusting about money, or fearing that they might later be resentful if he accepted their help but didn't find a way to repay them, said, "We need to talk about how this is all going to get settled." So the man who towed the car said, "If it will make you feel better, you can help me load my truck." So they do, and as they finish, the mechanic drives the car up. And Neal's father says, "I really don't know how to thank you all." They turn to go, and the mechanic says, "Hey, where do you think you're going." Fear and distrust pass through Neal and his dad. As they stiffen, the mechanic says, "No no, relax, come have dinner with my family, you can clean up, eat and it will make the drive a lot easier." That night, Neal says, when he got into bed, his father stood in the doorway and said, "No matter what you see on tv, in the movies, or read in the news, you listen to me: *That's* how people *really* are."

Outside in our pajamas and rubber gloves, stacking soggy possessions in the sun to make an attempt to dry them, one neighbor said, "There are 2 things that are good about this, one, all this stuff? It's probably clutter we should've gotten rid of a long time ago. And two, we get to spend all of this time with our neighbors." *That's* how people *really* are.

There is so much badness. So much pain. So much work to do. So many voices that tell us that our world and people are hateful and untrustworthy. That goodness, kindness, fairness, safety, peace is unattainable, always on the other side of the unturnable, soaked page. And yet, we can see those words, "*Achat sha'alti m'eit Adonai o-tah avahkesh*--One thing I ask of the

Eternal One, only that do I seek: to be close to God, all the days of my life .”<sup>4</sup> We yearn for God’s sheltering presence, for an end to all suffering. But we? We are on the page before.

Our sages read a verse from Isaiah, “*v’chol banayich limudei Adonai, v’rav shalom banayich*.”--All of your children shall be taught of The Eternal, and great shall be their peace.”<sup>5</sup> But the sages say, don’t read it “*banayich--your children*” rather, Read “*bo-nayich--your builders*.”<sup>6</sup> For it is those who yearn for closeness to God, who *build* peace.

And what we know, in our yearning, from the page before, is that it is people, neighbors who text you in the middle of the night, who help you schlep your soaked couch, people who pull over to help, *those* people, *build* the place where God dwells.

“*Achat sha’alti m’eit Adonai o-tah avakesh*”--One thing, I ask of you God, to be with You, to be with those who yearn for you, to be among those builders, those neighbors, those people, who through caring and kindness, pain and struggle, in the midst of so much that is wrong, continue to see the words on the other side, who *build* a world of safety, of fairness, of love, of empathy, of peace. A place worthy of God’s dwelling, all the days of our lives.

*G’mar hatima tovah*, may we each be inscribed as *bonim*, as builders of the eternal peace we yearn for.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 27:4

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 54:13

<sup>6</sup> Berachot 64a