

## Imagination

A few weeks ago, I sat on the deck of a log cabin near Woodstock, NY and enjoyed an early morning coffee. And as I looked out at the lush green landscape I began to think about what I would say tonight. The hardest part of writing a *Drasha* is to decide where to begin, to find those key words that might catch the congregation's attention. As I contemplated several options, I heard a slight rustle. My immediate concern was that it might be the same bear that had visited us a few days earlier and carried off the remains of our dinner. But as I looked up, I was astounded to see someone else altogether, not a bear, but someone I had not in the least expected to see in Woodstock, none other than the man you have heard me talk about many times in the past, the man you have kindly come to call the Rebbe of Dupont Circle. Here he was, in the flesh, with his beard, his sidelocks, but no hat or caftan, and in a more casual country attire, a black velvet *kippah*, an immaculate white shirt and a *tallit katan* with *tzitzit* hanging down; and with a smile more impish than usual. I was so taken aback that I did not even extend the usual *Shalom Aleichem*. "What are you doing here?" I asked. "Oh," he replied, "I thought I'd allow myself a slight change in scenery. You see, I have an advantage that is denied other mere mortals. It's the advantage of being a figment of your imagination. I can be here, I can be there, I can be anywhere." "A figment," I protested, "a figment, after all the terrifying times when I did not know what to say on Rosh Hashanah and you comforted me and helped me find the right words to address the congregation? Are you now asking me to confess to my friends at Bet Mishpachah that you are nothing but a fake, a figment of my imagination?" "Not to worry," the Rebbe replied, "Imagination is the greatest gift bestowed on us by the Almighty. Do you remember the words of Descartes?" "*Cogito ergo sum*," I replied, "I think therefore I am." "No," he said, "I knew Descartes, Descartes was a friend of mine. And what he really meant was, 'I imagine, therefore I am.' Imagination is what makes us human. And imagination is what has kept the Jewish people alive through the millennia. May I sit down and tell you a story?" "Of course," I said, and showed him a chair and, as I saw him look longingly at my mug, I took out another and poured him some coffee. "Mm...Sumatra, my favorite," he said.

The tale is about Reb Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin, better known as the Seer of Lublin because he was a visionary and had the ability to see beyond space and time. It was Saturday night in the Rebbe's synagogue, Havdalah and the *Ma'ariv* prayers had been said, and since it was the eve of *Rosh Chodesh*, the new month, the Rebbe and his *Chasidim* were anxious to go outside and greet the New Moon with singing and dancing as was their custom. The Rebbe was quite old and frail and leaned heavily on his assistant Reb Zi Hersch as he ever so slowly made his way to the door. But this was the month of *Cheshvan*, in the middle of fall, and it was raining and to their great disappointment there was no moon to be seen. And the Rebbe sighed, and then turned to his assistant, Reb Zvi Hersch, and said "Reb Zvi, you have been so very kind to me, and maybe now you will provide us with a moon. There is no moon to be seen from where we stand, but perhaps, if we go back into the *Shul*, the Almighty, in return for Reb Zvi's kindness, will provide us with a moon." The *Chasidim* giggled because the window inside the *Shul* faced the wrong way and never provided a view of the moon. But their Rebbe schussed them and they acceded to his wish and made their way back into the synagogue and looked out the

window. And lo and behold, there was a clear sky and the perfect slim sickle of a new moon. “A miracle!” the Chasidim exclaimed. “Yes,” the Seer of Lublin said, “imagination and an act of kindness can turn the whole universe around.” And with that my friend, the Rebbe of Dupont Circle vanished without so much as a goodbye. And all that was left was an empty cup.

Imagination! It’s the gift that allowed us to explore the universe as children and it’s the gift that we constrain and banish as adults. But it is imagination that moves us from the narrow precincts of today’s reality to the hope of a better tomorrow. In 1944 It was imagination that freed my own mother from the confines of a cattle car when, as she was being transported from one concentration camp to another, she peeked out through some cracks she saw an emerging spring, and quietly said *“Barukh ata adonai elohenu melekh ha’olam, shehecheyanu, v’kiymanu, v’higiyanu la’z’man ha’zeh.”*

Imagination is part and parcel of the biblical narrative of our forebears. Imagination allowed Abraham to hear and heed a voice and set out on a journey to a new land, to a new view of the universe, and to a new moral code for humankind. Imagination allowed Moses to hear the Almighty’s summons at the burning bush and set free a people that had been enslaved. Imagination is what allowed a ragtag band of Israelites to hear and commit to the Almighty’s words at Sinai. Imagination gave voice to the prophets as they called on our people to free the oppressed and to pursue justice. Imagination fashioned a faith that allowed the smallest of nations to survive and to thrive in spite of dispersion and persecution. Imagination was at the heart of the birth of a State of Israel barely three years after the horrors of the Holocaust. And imagination fostered the thousands of stories by Masters like the Seer of Lublin that rekindle our own imagination.

Imagination also moved a motley crew of rebels in America to renounce oppression by a distant king and build a new nation fashioned on equality, justice and human dignity.

Sixty years ago, I received a telegram from my mom, “Mittwoch Bad Ischl,” “Wednesday Bad Ischl.” Those three words started us on a journey from Europe to America. I was at a Yeshiva in France and Mom was in Brussels, and Bad Ischl was the place in the Austrian Alps where we would meet and continue on together to bid farewell to my Dad who lies buried in the former Ebensee concentration camp where he succumbed two months after liberation by the US Army. For me it was a reminder always to remember a Dad I never knew. For Mom it was the start of a journey to free herself from the loss at the hands of the Nazis of a husband, two daughters and countless other family members. For me it was also saying goodbye on the dock to the man who had rescued me from the hands of the Nazis, but a man whom I would always still call Papa, Tolé Madna.

Imagination carried my mom and me to America. And to see the Statue of Liberty for the first time as we ate breakfast on the ss Rijndam was imagination come true. To us America was a New World, a country where everyone had the opportunity to thrive, a country that welcomed the stranger, a country with none of the narrowmindedness and anti-Semitism that persisted in Europe even after the Holocaust.

But, shortly after our arrival, when we acquired our first television set and watched the news and saw the images of black children being jeered and cursed and blocked from attending school, we learned that America was not free of hate and prejudice. And as we learned that some of the most prominent American universities still imposed limits on the number of Jews they would admit as students, we realized that America was still far from being the “*Goldene Medineh.*”

But imagination allowed a Martin Luther King, Jr. to see a land where his children “would no longer be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,” and to fuel a movement for equality that in spite of countless obstacles continues to bear fruit.

Equal rights for gays and lesbians were unimaginable until a much derided group of the most marginalized people in the gay community: drag queens, transgender people, effeminate young men, butch lesbians, male prostitutes, and homeless youth got it into their heads to say no to humiliation and arrest at Stonewall. Their unwillingness to abide by the day’s reality laid the foundation for a Supreme Court decision that in the words of Justice Kennedy recognized their “equal dignity in the eyes of the law. “

Today we are living in times that test our imagination. Some of the older Holocaust survivors I have befriended at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum see frightening parallels in today’s political rallies with those of Germany in the 1930’s. Seventy years after the world ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, anti-Semitism is again rearing its ugly head in parts of Europe and freedom of conscience is being challenged throughout the world. Seventy years after the world said “never again” to state sponsored atrocities and genocide, Rohingya are mercilessly being persecuted in Burma and close to 20,000 children have been murdered by the Assad regime in Syria.

And America, sadly, like she did in in the 1930’s, has foresworn her obligation to shelter people escaping persecution. Instead her leaders –our leaders-- have ordered the forcible removal of thousands of children from their immigrant parents, broken with long-time allies and embraced tyrants and despots and bestowed moral equivalence to neo-Nazis and those protesting them. And rights earned by Rosa Parks, Harvey Milk, Audre Lorde and countless other champions of freedom and equality are being eroded or rolled back.

But Rosh Hashanah is not a day of mourning, not a time to lament the present. It is a time to rekindle our imagination and to recommit to the ideals enumerated in our Torah: To respect the dignity of all creatures; to love our neighbor; to not stand idly by as the blood of our neighbor is being shed; to embrace the ways of peace and to love the stranger.

And I take heart from a new generation that gives voice to their imagination. There is Malala Yousafza, who in early 2009, when she was 11 or 12, wrote a blog in Urdu detailing her life during the Taliban occupation and who in 2012 was shot in the head by the Taliban, miraculously recovered and then became the world’s youngest Nobel Prize laureate for her advocacy of women’s rights.

I may not be a fan of punk rock, but I admire, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina and other members of Pussy Riot, who gave free rein to their imagination to confront the cruel homophobia of the Russian Government.

And who can forget the words of 11-year-old Naomi Wadler as she addressed thousands of young people at the March for Our Lives Rally in the aftermath of the shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School that left 17 people dead. "I represent the African American women who are victims of gun violence, who are simply statistics instead of vibrant, beautiful girls full of potential."

And this past year I became acquainted with a man and a woman from little Conway Arkansas, Jerry Adams and Teri Daily, who were moved by the plight of young children in the most war-torn region of Syria and founded the Wisdom House Project which brings together kindergarteners in Conway with their counterparts in an orphanage in Syria.

"Blow the shofar at the moon's renewal, at the time appointed for our festive day." Rosh Hashanah, the Torah reminds us, does not only inaugurate our religious New Year but is also the day of a New Moon. The sainted Seer of Lublin reminds us that even as the world is beset gloom, Malala, Nadezhda, Maria, Naomi, Jerry and Teri and countless other heroes like them, are turning the universe around, and allow us to see the glimmer of a new moon. It falls to us to follow in their footsteps and to let our imaginations carry us to a better world.

As the song says:

There's glow in my heart  
I guess it's because

There's a moon out tonight  
Moon out tonight  
Moon out tonight  
Moon out tonight  
There's a moon out tonight. \*

*LeShana Tova Takatevu.* May we all be inscribed for a good year.

Alfred Munzer

Rosh Hashanah 5779, September 9, 2018

\*Songwriters: John Cassese / M Mincelli / N Santa Maria