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AWAKENING FROM BAD DREAMS

One of the least known rituals in traditional Judaism, found in some classical Siddurim, is entitled סדר הטבת חלום, the ritual of making good a bad dream. Upon awakening from a bad dream, the dreamer would gather together three friends and recite in their presence the phrase “הלמא טבא הזאי – I have dreamt a good dream” seven times, to which the friends would respond: “הלמא טבא תזינת – You have dreamt a good dream.”

This הטבת חלום, this ritual transformation of a bad dream into a good one, was likely an attempt to avert the possibility of the bad dream becoming fulfilled, in other words, an urgent effort to make it go away.

We know that nightmares can be scary. Some are a revisiting of very dark days of the past, often experienced by survivors of the Shoah, and other traumatic life-altering circumstances. Others, as reflected in the Talmudic statement of Rabbi Yonatan (*Berakhot* 55b), “אין מראין לו לאדם אלא מהרהורי לבו” – that one sees [in a dream] only that which is suggested by his own thoughts,” others will see projected, in the midst of their deepest sleep, their worst fears and premonitions.

All said and done, dreams are a scary business. We all have them, some of us more often than others. We awaken, unsure for a moment or two of which

world we inhabit, whether or not what we just went through was real or imagined. We awaken, shaken, disoriented, afraid.

We are all very familiar with the dream of our forefather Jacob, who, while fleeing from the anger of his brother Esau, lies down for the night, takes מאבני המקום, one of the stones of his rest stop, places it under his head, falls into a deep sleep and dreams of the ladder joining earth and heaven. The dream over, he wakes up, וַיָּרָא, and is terrified. Ostensibly, based on what he says, Jacob's fear emanates from his not having recognized the holiness of the spot where he had slept. "אכן יש ה' במקום הזה ואנכי לא ידעתי" – Wow, the Lord was in this place, and I did not know!" But as the rabbis will suggest through Midrash, his fear went far further, that his dream mirrored his aloneness in that isolated, dark place, and reflected the future isolation of his descendants, the people of Israel, "עַם לְבַדָּד יֵשְׁכֶן (Num. 23:9), a people that is destined to dwell alone."

I will return to Jacob in a few minutes, but first, I want to bring today into the picture. Look, since last Yom Kippur, until this first morning of Rosh Hashanah, when was this sanctuary most crowded? In any other year, the answer would have been one of the *Yizkor* mornings, especially the last day of *Pesah*, which tends to draw large numbers of worshippers. But this past year was different. Our largest shul attendance was not a *Yom Tov*, rather a regular Shabbat morning, Shabbat *Hayei Sarah*. There were no *simhahs* that Shabbat, no typical reason to explain the overflow crowd, when open seats were very hard to find.

We know why so many of us found a need to be here that Shabbat morning eleven months ago, since one week earlier, eleven of our fellow Jews at prayer

were murdered in a mass shooting in the Pittsburgh suburb of Squirrel Hill, at Congregation Tree of Life.

This tragedy hit very close to home for many of us. One of the victims, Joyce Fienberg, had family connections to Toronto, and specifically, to Beth David. And the Rabbi Emeritus of Tree of Life, Rabbi Alvin Berkun, is a personal friend and fellow past-President of the Rabbinical Assembly. When I spoke with Alvin a few days after the horrific attack, he shared with me how, in his words, his wife Flora had saved his life. That early November morning, Shabbat *Vayera*, he was about to leave for shul, when Flora asked him to stay home. She was not well, and feeling especially ill that morning, did not want to be left alone. (Sadly, she has recently passed away.) Alvin listened to his wife, stayed home, and as he puts it, for that reason, remains alive. You see, his normal seat in shul, now that he was retired, was in the back row, next to the first five victims of the shooter that dark Shabbat morning.

Simultaneous to those terrible events at Tree of Life, we were engaged in our Torah reading which centered on pivotal events in the life of *Avraham Avinu*, events reflecting the illusiveness of happiness, the seeming impossibility of experiencing *simhah*, pure joy, uninterrupted by pain and loss.

Two consecutive verses in *Vayera*, which happen to be part of this morning's Rosh Hashanah reading as well, make the point vividly and clearly. “ וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד – The child [Isaac] grew and was weaned and Avraham held a great feast on the day he was weaned.”

That was verse eight of the 21st chapter of the Book of Genesis. In verse eight, Abraham and Sarah are allowed a moment of happiness, of celebration. But the very next verse tells a very different story. Sarah notices the son of her handmaid Hagar, “מִצְחָק - playing, mocking, doing idolatry...” We’re not sure what מִצְחָק means in this context (ironically, the exact same root as the name יִצְחָק), but we know that Sarah didn’t like it – and, one verse later, she tells her husband: “גֵּרֵשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-בְּנָהּ - Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for that boy will not share in Isaac’s inheritance. The very next verse tells us how Abraham felt about Sarah’s demand: “וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינָי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹלַת בְּנוֹ - The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned his son.” One verse later, God tells Abraham he still has to listen to his wife, and he does so – bitterly unhappy at having to lose Ishmael because of Isaac.

Abraham’s celebration barely makes it through a single פסוק, a single verse. So short-lived is his joy, that we begin to understand better what happened in the final chapter of *Vayera*, which will be tomorrow’s Second Day reading, when God demanded of Abraham the ultimate, that he bring Isaac, the only son left in his care, to the altar of Moriah for sacrifice. We begin to understand Abraham’s silence, his lack of protest at this seemingly horrific *mitzvah*, because he has learned through the ancient school of hard knocks that happiness is fleeting, that *nahas* is short-lived. Even when God commanded of him the obliteration of any future, of any posterity, Avraham was resigned, hiding his undeniable brokenness behind a mask of faith. Even in the moment of reprieve, when the angel made it clear that God didn’t want Abraham to sacrifice his son – there was no celebration, no הלל, no songs of praise, no rejoicing. Abraham, burned once too often by life, was no longer seduced by שמחה, rather, it would seem, he waited for the ax of tragedy once again to fall.

The suddenness of transition in the Torah reading of *Vayera*, verses read today and tomorrow, and which were read concurrent to the massacre of eleven Jews at prayer in Squirrel Hill, reminded us that just as Abraham's fortune could transition from joy to sorrow from one verse to the next, so too, the comfort level that we Jews feel in the U.S. and Canada, where, by and large, we have been welcomed and where we feel at home, and secure – can in an instant, be upended, and the insecurities of old restored, as a virulent and violent anti-Semitism invaded the holy sanctity of Shabbat.

A friend, living in Pittsburgh, the son of survivors of the Shoah, shared with me his feeling that we were re-experiencing 1938, that the horrors of the past were not as much behind us as we may have assumed. We have so often sung the words of Rav Nahman of Bratzlav, that כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאד – that the world in its entirety is a narrow bridge – והעיקר – but the essential message of the Jew – לא לפחד כלל – is not to be afraid. Words easier sung than done. It's hard not to fear for the future, our Jewish future, the future of humanity, in the face of evil such as witnessed last year, and in other, too frequent acts of terror, at places of worship, at schools, at nightclubs, at concert-venues, on city streets, occurring with stunning regularity in the U.S., but to which we here, in Canada, are not immune, and which threaten innocents world-wide. All of the security in the planet cannot strip away that layer of fear for what can happen, when evil, when hatred, continue to flourish and threaten to strike when unexpected, making all of us vulnerable. So how do we respond to this fundamental precariousness of the world in which we live, how do we move forward, what do we do?

Let's look again at Abraham for answers. At the very conclusion of this morning's Torah reading, we read a curious verse (21:33): “וַיֵּטַע אֱשֶׁל בְּבְאֵר שְׁבַע”

ויקרא-שם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה אֵל עוֹלָם: [Abraham] planted a tamarisk at Be'er Sheva, and invoked there the Name of the Lord, the Everlasting God."

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Nehemia¹ interprets אשל (tamarisk, a tree) to be an acronym אש"ל, bringing together the three words - אכילה, שתיה ולינה - eating, drinking and lodging - leading to the suggestion of a full-service hotel.

What does this easy-to-ignore verse, in the midst of great drama and tension, tell us? That Abraham, notwithstanding his disappointment in the world, the hardships of his life, when all is said and done, did not abandon hope in humanity, in life itself. If he could teach one, or two, or maybe a *minyan* of human beings the value of gratitude, the beauty of חסד, of kindness, by offering them shelter and nourishment when most of the world would not have cared had they wilted and died in the harshness of their physical and moral environment - maybe, slowly to be sure, he could begin a process of change that could, eventually, lead to God being more pleased with the world He had created.

Thus, as our sages taught, Abraham demonstrated the value of גמילות חסדים, of acts of kindness. There can be no better response to the presence of evil in the world, to a prevailing ugliness that can overwhelm us and lead us to the brink of despair, than human decency. Thoughts and prayers for those who hurt or suffer do little if anything at all to alleviate their suffering. Rather, גמילות חסדים are called for: actions that demonstrate caring for suffering communities, donations to alleviate the victims of tropical storms and other natural upheavals, advocacy for those whose pain would be lessened, were there to be

¹ TB Sotah 10a-b

more חסד, more kindness among world leaders and others in positions of influence to make a difference.

So Abraham taught us גמילות חסדים, the power of human decency. But I promised that I would get back to Jacob, and I won't disappoint. Jacob, upon awakening from his unsettling dream, the Torah tells us: "took his pillow-stone – וישם אתה – מצבה – and set it up as a monument," which upon his return from his journey, would become the center-point of his faith.

And Jacob, our sages teach, bequeathed to us the value of תפילה, of prayer. His establishment of the first sanctuary in our history suggested that faith, that spirituality, that prayer, do play a role in giving us the momentum, the strength, the ability to overcome the deep challenges of history and of present-day reality.

My colleague, a gifted writer, Rabbi Harold Kushner, has written:²

Prayer is one of the most familiar ways of alleviating the sense of helplessness. People pray in hospitals and doctors' offices, seeking a favorable test result or a good outcome after a treatment. On the weekend following the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 and on the weekend following 9/11, churches and synagogues were filled to overflowing with people who didn't know what else to do with their anxiety and sense of helplessness except to turn to God.... They needed to feel they were doing something with their grief, their fear, their newfound

² Harold S. Kushner, *Conquering Fear*, 2009, p. 16

sense of vulnerability rather than helplessly keeping these feelings inside them. More than anything, they needed not to be alone.

How else would we explain the fact that our shul, and all shuls were packed this past November 3rd, the Shabbat following the Tree of Life massacre? As was the case during previous unforgettable moments of horror, we needed the strength that prayer, that community would provide. Just as Abraham understood the importance of human decency to see us through life's more challenging times, so too, his grandson Jacob understood the place that prayer, that faith, that continuity of tradition would take in leading us to a better day.

Far too often, when we awaken to the morning news, it seems as if we have awakened from a bad dream, which not even an ancient ritual can nullify. These days, acts of violence, acts of terror, acts of evil, ever-present anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism (a distinction without a difference), challenge even the most secure and the most faithful among us. But we, the inheritors of a great tradition, have what it takes to see us through to better days.

Bari Weiss, *New York Times* Op-Ed Columnist and author of the newly-released important book *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, earlier this month, in the *Times*, wrote the following: ³

There has not been a single moment in Jewish history in which there weren't anti-Semites determined to eradicate Judaism and the Jews. When the Pittsburgh killer shouted "all Jews must die," he was merely echoing a command uttered in a different tongue by Amalek, the villain who stalked

³ Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, NYT, September 8, 2019, p. SR 7

the weakest of the ancient Israelites in the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

But the Jews did not sustain their magnificent civilization because they were anti-anti-Semites. Our tradition was always renewed by people who made the choice in the face of tragedy that theirs would not be the end of the Jewish story, but the catalyst for writing a new chapter.

The long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that the only way to fight is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are. By entering the fray for our values, for our ideas, for our ancestors, for our families, and for the generations that will come after us....

In these trying times, our best strategy is to build, without shame, a Judaism and a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul — and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours.

Finally, back in November, I shared with you the story of the דף יומי in Auschwitz, that there were Jews even there, who committed themselves to the daily study of a folio of Talmud. Many Jews in our community, and other communities, avail themselves of a דף יומי group, and attend, each day, for an hour or so, to go through that day's designated page of Talmud study. It is a major commitment, even in Toronto. But, in Auschwitz, without the books, without the freedom, with the enormous risk, in the very real and very frightful shadow of death – that it happened there, is truly amazing. But there were Jews who knew the entire Talmud by heart, they were the living *Sifrei Torah* that could teach and lead a *Daf Yomi* group, even in hell itself.

The story is told of a particular father and son. The teller of the story doesn't even know their names. But they were part of the דף יומי group in Auschwitz. One day, in a selection, they were separated forever. But as the father was marched away to his death, the eyewitness reports that he turned to his son and called out: "Don't forget, today it's סנהדרין סז: today's *daf* is Sanhedrin 67b." That was it, his parting message. סז: Sanhedrin. The page of Talmud designated for study that day. ⁴

Like Abraham, like Jacob, whose acts of kindness, whose deeds of faith at times of personal uncertainty and anguish, signaled to all future Jewish generations what it would take to make a go of it in a troubled world, so too, our father who studied Talmud with his son in Auschwitz understood that even the smallest of achievements could make life worthwhile, that an ancient page of text, passed lovingly from one generation to the next, was enough to ensure that לא יכבה נרו – לעולם ועד – that the precious flame that we as Jews have inherited, would never be extinguished, just as the values, principles and righteous deeds of our forebears live on through us, as we work hard to uphold that which they cherished, that which set us on the path to being a permanent, unshakeable presence in a world sorely in need of what we have to offer, of what we can do to insure the presence of even a single ember of hope in these challenging times.

⁴ Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, *The Rabbinical Assembly, Proceedings 1996*, p. 29