

GOD AND US

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Master of the universe I will sing a song to you.
Where will I find you? And where will I find you not?
Where I go, there you are. Where I stay, there are you.
Only you, you alone, You again, and only you.
Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev¹

GOD'S BEING

"I am the Lord your God" isn't a commandment. It doesn't have to be. The deepest experiences don't need to spell out their own implications. We know.

I remember moments when I have been most in love with life, when I have felt bound in a spirit of thankfulness with the leaves, the trees, the hillside and the night, when I have lain down so that my heart would sing next to where the grass sings, and have got up and walked on in joy. That moment of prostration has been an act of fealty, when I have made my vows to life: "I promise not to hurt you; I promise to carry the love of you with me. So may you be with me when I need you." I know that I have forgotten since, sometimes for years at a time; I know I have behaved faithlessly. But I have never for a second considered the command to be abrogated by which I am bound to love and honour life.

There are other kinds of realisation, different moments of commandment. I remember the picture of the young girl and the bird. It was during a prolonged and vicious drought in Africa and the girl was struggling to reach the camp where a relief organisation was supplying food and water. She had only a very little further to go, but her strength had come to an end and she sank, her body folded over her empty stomach in helpless abandonment. The bird, a vulture, sat scarcely a few yards away and watched. It knew: the girl would never reach the food and water. Surely we, like the photographer, are commanded: "If you do not carry such children with you..."

"I am the Lord your God" is not expressed in the imperative. It instructs us to do absolutely nothing. Yet once the reality behind these words has been experienced, once we have in any way felt the presence of God in our lives, we are utterly commanded. There can be no thought or action which is not, explicitly or implicitly, a response to the deepest reality we know. We can call it by many names, God, Allah, transcendent being, the consciousness that comprehends all life. But however we name it, it is present, whether we are aware of it or not, in every interaction and in all consciousness at all times.

Moments of awareness, and for most of us awareness is rare and momentary only, belong to the great treasures of our experience. We cherish them like the presentiments of a great love. They are the stars by which we navigate our existential darkness. All such moments are revelation and form part of a continuum with Sinai. For as Rebbe Yehudah Aryeh Lev of Ger, the *Sefat Emet*, explains, in those seconds when God spoke "All creation was focussed upwards toward the root of its vitality...When God said 'I am the Lord your God' all created beings understood the words to be addressed specifically to them...Then everything was perfected as is right." Any moment in which any consciousness apprehends the universal being is therefore connected to the same communion as Sinai.

Faith is a way of experiencing life. It is often misrepresented. It is not a dogma only, a set of mental convictions that certain propositions are true. It is not a master plan for how to play chess with life's contradictions or an escape route from life's anguish. For faith is in the living, including the doubt, the anxiety, the pain and the long periods of ignorance and forgetting between short moments of knowledge and realisation. Thus faith is never an entitlement to complacency.

¹ In *The World Of A Hasidic Master: Levi Yitzhak Of Berdichev* by Samuel H. Dresner p. 106-7 (Shapolsky Publishers, New York 1986)

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Neither can faith ever justify zealotry. To disregard life, to insult, wound and kill in the name of God is to betray the very God in whose name the deed is perpetrated. For how can the living God, whose presence is manifest in all consciousness, be served by killing? How can God be present potentially among my people, in my land, in my consciousness, and not potentially in your people, your country and your heart also? For there is no Jewish God, no Muslim God, no Christian God, no “your God” and no “my God” but only God.

On the contrary, faith is always a moral challenge, a constant struggle to be faithful to life. As the *Sefat Emet* goes on to explain, in the moment when God speaks and creation hears, “No one is capable of committing wrong. For nature itself prevents anyone from transgressing the intention of the Creator.” In the moment of knowledge, when we understand that we and all life belong to God, we are filled with such reverence for life that our only desire is to honour and cherish it. All selfishness, all desire to do wrong and to hurt, is abrogated.

The problem is that the moment falls away and we forget. We live in a world of concealment and hold weakly to the memories of rare and exceptional experiences of beauty that are soon contradicted and eroded. It is in this muddled and jaded reality that our faithfulness is constantly put to the test. It is tried in the rush hour, at the supermarket, in the way we talk to our family, and in our responses to difference, indifference and hatred.

Everything we do matters. An ugly deed always drives something precious away. The incident may be completely trivial. The other day I had a misunderstanding with a man on the pavement. I thought he was waiting for me, so I slowly backed my car out of the drive. He thought I was waiting for him and walked on. The next moment he was right next to my car window shaking his fist. Although I had no intention of behaving rudely, I had become part of an unpleasant interaction and felt ugly, as if on some level of being I had inflicted damage. Such incidents happen to us every day and leave behind them a wake either of violence or of grace. This is not even to speak of the great divisions and hatreds which afflict humanity.

On the other hand, a moment of beauty brings the hidden wonder of life into conscious recognition. Outside, a jay sits on a pine branch, a small bird hops into a nest; the tree is filled with life. Ultimately the same being whose vitality traverses all worlds holds us together as fragments among all the countless manifestations of the same consciousness. Here is God’s presence in the birds, in the tree and in between us.

That presence is latent, too, in the care we feel for another person. I watch a child hug her grandmother outside the school and run off into the playground. Tenderness, compassion and understanding invoke a deeper sense of being; we are drawn together by what transcends us all and which, in our loving, we all serve.

Every moment of life presents the challenge of faithfulness or betrayal.

But there are, mercifully, unanticipated experiences of beauty and grace. However brief and transient to us, the eternal vitality flows through them like water along a hillside stream. Silenced and awakened, our spirit recognises that being which encompasses and enfolds it. God is speaking to us, the everlasting “I am.” We renew our vows to life.

HINNENI

At the heart of life a voice is singing. We heard it when we walked that dusk along the canal, when the tiny grey-brown cygnets climbed out of the water onto their mother’s back and she hid them under her feathers and carried them beneath her wings. The voice answers nothing and says everything, without uttering a single word.

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A voice is singing. Perhaps one shouldn't say "voice" because there are no lips and there is no sound. The world is filled with the paradox of its silence: "Day utters speech to day and night communicates knowledge to night" reads the Psalm, before continuing, "There is no speech; there are no words; their voice isn't heard at all."² For there is nothing that offers an explanation.

Part of the problem is that we want so much of God that we forget God in thinking of what we want. We don't hear because what we're listening for is something else. Perhaps it's the Bible's fault for leading us to expect revelation in similar proportions, or at least a word from heaven the way God used to bestow it on the prophets. But what if God has long since done with that kind of disclosure? What if it never actually happened quite like that? What if it never occurred that way even in ancient times, but the creators of narratives recorded it thus - with all that speaking, acting, stretching forth of mighty hands, deliverance and wrath, because they understood that God had indeed been present in some decisive form, had been the essence and the inspiration of their history, and all other kinds of language had failed them in trying to describe the silent absence of God's utter manifestation?

We crave answers: "Answer us on the day we call" begins the evening service. "Answer us, father of orphans; answer us, judge of widows," concludes the penitential prayer. The words are at once an impassioned demand for a response, and an articulation of the baffled anguish of the moment: "God, in the midst of all this sorrow and confusion, help us!" But God appears recalcitrant and no voice speaks from the sky. Or maybe God isn't that kind of God. For God descends in no obvious way either to explain the past or to indicate the future.

Struggling to live with what we can't understand, we often impose fictions on the silence, making it noisy with our justifications. How many people think, despite themselves, when someone dies before their time: "The way he lived his life, always running"; or, less cruelly, "God wants her in heaven"; or, more simply, "There must be reasons for everything in God's book." Maybe such constructs do ease the pain of suffering. After all, what comfort is there in the thought that fate is largely random, that what happened may have occurred for little, if any, reason at all? But that doesn't suffice to make those statements true. They are born of our anguish, of our incapacity not to know, of the need to turn life into a coherent story. The process of composing them about our own sufferings and struggles, with ifs and buts and maybes, may lie at the heart of our search for meaning. But proposed as truths which explain the destiny of others, they are frequently harsh and sometimes punitive, even if not consciously intended in that way. Thus they aptly reflect life's own imponderable cruelties, to accommodate which we require them. We need the stories to silence the silence of what we don't know.

Yet at the heart of life a voice is speaking. We heard it together in the hospital room when my friend said with his characteristic frankness and courage, "It's *Ne'ilah* now; this is the end."

But the voice says nothing about either the why or the wherefore and we badly need explanations. Abraham wants an explanation. "Should the judge of all the earth not do justice!" he demands.³ He even argues God down to the concession that the city of Sodom should be saved for the sake of a just ten righteous people within it. But what the text fails to address is why God should allow even a single innocent person to burn to death? The next morning Abraham looks out at the rising smoke from the city in flames. One wonders what might be his thoughts.

Moses wants to know the answer. At the moment of his greatest achievement, when he saves Israel from God's wrath after they make the golden calf, chastising the people for their sin and God for God's destructive intentions, he demands of heaven: "Make known to me your ways." According to rabbinic tradition, what he actually asks is the old question why the wicked so frequently prosper while the righteous have to suffer. But even the Talmud can produce no credible answer.⁴

Job wants to know why. His pain is terrible enough, but what goads him into fury are the lies his so-called friends keep telling him about God. It isn't true, he insists, that everything conforms to a single pattern in which suffering means

² Psalm 19:4

³ Genesis 18:25

⁴ Exodus 33:13, and Talmud Berachot 7a

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punishment, and the punishment invariably fits the crime. No, he conceals not a single secret sin which could justify this misery. God does eventually vindicate Job and admonishes his friends for speaking falsely about the deity. But God fails to provide Job with any logical explanation of all his gratuitous pain; God offers him no alternative interpretations. There is only the inscrutable wonder of creation. “Only”; but it is enough, that voice singing at the heart of creation.

So, if Abraham, Moses and Job receive none, why should we obtain answers? Yet it is almost impossible to escape the compulsion to seek them. How can one say, in the face of misery and injustice, that there is a God, yet maintain that that God is not implicated, is not the why and the wherefore? What use then is God, if “believing in God” justifies nothing and fails to explain anything? Wouldn’t it be simpler to concede and agree with the atheist?

But a voice is speaking at the heart of creation. It is not there for use or function. It is, because it is. It is here in the tumultuous bird song of dawn; here it is in the sudden quietness at dusk. Stilling the restless, agitated mind, still in the stillness of the conscience, taut in the heart’s attentiveness, reverberating in the soul that permeates and dissolves us, is this voice.

“Hinneni; here am I.”

Who said that? Was it that voice again? No; it was me, experiencing myself addressed. But the voice itself is more like silence, endless being overheard in the process of its own articulation. It pervades all, all is interpenetrated with it; it transcends all, and all is transient within it; it is at once the entirety of love and the totality of destiny. When we hear it, all it says is “I am what I am.” Or rather it says nothing, for names are merely human words and the voice is not merely human.

After all, it isn’t actually true that all we want of God is explanations. We want God.

A young man is very ill. Others are asking “Why should this be?” For some time he, too, is haunted by that question, creating many painful answers. But at a crucial point, at a moment of healing, it loses its central relevance though never entirely absent from his thoughts. For he is listening to something else, if only for a few moments, if only now and not then, and then again for just a moment. The singing of the silence is embracing him.

“Hinneni,” he says, “Here am I. This is me. I have nothing; will you have me just as I am?” It says, “But I am already with you; we have each other always.” It says, “Look! The world is mine from the root to the leaf, from birth to death, from the earth to the sky.” It says nothing at all.

Who was it who said “Hinneni”“?”

God, say something more! There are so many essential matters we need to hear you address!

On the pond in the dark two ducks are swimming close to one another. It seems at first as if they are silent, but between them is a constant, quiet chattering, an almost inaudible intimacy. It calms the spirit; it reassures the heart. Asking “What is that voice really saying?”, demanding “Tell me more!”, these are not the proper questions.

“Hinneni, I am what I am”: Is there, ultimately, anything else that needs to be said? What it means is clear without demanding that every clause be set down. Each moment is subject to life’s commandments: to respect, to honour, to love, and never through injustice or unkindness to be faithless.

In articulate silence; listen!