

EREV ROSH HASHANAH

Abstract

These four short essays should be read as a single unity. The vignettes are based on a Talmudic story, found in the the section called Chagigay on page 14:b. Each essay tells the story of one of four rabbis who visit a mystical garden, called Ha'Pardes (the orchard) and in so doing are changed forever. One will enter the "garden of the mind. One goes dies, one loses his mind, one becomes an traitor and one emerges whole. Their tale is expanded upon in this composite essay and becomes symbolic not only of the Jewish holidays of Rosh Ha'Shanah and Yom Kippur but of each of us. Read together they explore four sides of our personalities and force us to dare to enter into the realm of the self. This composite essay written in four separate chapters forces us to look deeply into ourselves, to view the parts from which we would prefer to hide and reveal the parts of our psyche that bring light to the world. The essay, really chapters in sermon format, take us from each person's suicidal dark side to the light of each person's creative side, teaching us along the way that no one is whole, but all of us to seek peace must learn to unite our rational minds with our feeling hearts. As such the essay reflects the Biblical concept of the "lev" (the heart) which unlike the Western symbol is more than mere feelings but rather is the symbol of wholeness, the place where rational thought merges with feeling to create a reflection of the unity of God in the wholeness of each of God's human beings. It challenges us to be "just a little lower than the angels" and messengers for a better tomorrow

Introduction

Of all the great works of Jewish literature, none is so profound and complex as that vast body of writings known as the "Talmud". Scholars often compare the Talmud, to the vastness of the seas. It is a boundless non-redacted body of literature that takes us into the depths of Jewish philosophy, theology, laws, customs, sociology, and psychology. Written in the tersest of styles, the Talmud often leaves its readers with more questions than answers and more doubts than certainties. In the Talmudic vastness each problem's solution leads to new and ever-deeper inquiries into the human soul.

This evening, I want to begin to explore with you one the Talmud's laconic passages. In classic Talmudic style, the passage contains the fewest possible words. Yet with just a few broad literary strokes, this Talmudic tale challenges us to peer deeply into the essence of our lives. It is this piercing of souls, this desire to penetrate into the essence of our being, that reminds us that these Days of Awe are a journey toward spiritual renewal.

Deep in the Talmud, in the section called Chagigay, (on page 14:b) there is a strange story told of four rabbis who seek to discover a mystical garden known only as “Ha’Pardes.” meaning “The Orchard. ” Even the name leads us into a quandary: ¿Is this any orchard or a special one? ¿Is the word Pardes the basis for our notion of “paradise”?

The “pardes” of which we speak was no ordinary place. There are Talmudic scholars who connect the pardes with the Bible’s original Garden of Eden; others wonder if it might not be a symbol of the Middle East.

According to our Talmudic tale, four learned rabbis decided to embark on a journey to this place beyond time. In the best of Talmudic styles, it offers few descriptive details and leaves most of the tale to our imagination. Thus, there is more that we do not know than we do know. The text then, like Rosh Hashanah itself, is pregnant with meaning, not for what it says, but rather for what it chooses to hide.

What does the Talmud tell us about the journey? Not much, it states that four men, named: Rabbi Azzai, Rabbi Ben Zoma, Rabbi Ben Abuya, and Rabbi Akiba, entered a mystical garden. Their journey would change three of these men’s lives forever. The tale indicates that first traveler: Rabbi Azzai, peered too deeply and died. The second traveler, Rabbi Ben Zoma, could not stop looking at the orchard, and due to this fixation, he lost his mind. The third, Rabbi Ben Abuya could not accept the orchard for what it was; he became an apostate or traitor. Only, the fourth, Rabbi Akiba, was able to visit the orchard and emerge from it unscathed by this journey to the “soul of creation.”

¿How did these four rabbis enter the garden? ¿Did they pass through time? ¿Is this tale an example of the future occurring prior to the past? ¿Is this garden more a state of mind than a specific place? ¿Did the rabbis enter the very place where Adam and Eve were set, a place whose fruit grew on the Etz Da’at *the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*, and the spot from which humanity originated? Did our Talmudic rabbis return to the site of the first Rosh Hashanah? ¿Was this place, the “orchard of history”: a mystical garden set in a time before there was time?

Like the journey that each of us now begins into the year to come, these four men had no way of knowing what awaited them. To a great extent, their journey is our journey, a journey into the unknown filled: with hope and fears, high expectations and the realization that not everyone shall be so luckily as to see the journey through to its completion.

¿What does this strange and multi-layered Talmudic folk tale have to do with these High Holidays? ¿What kernels of wisdom can we take from their story so as to make it our own? ¿Can we transform this “garden of the imagination” into our personal tabernacles of time? ¿Is this a tale of four distinct men or ¿Is this perhaps the tale of four aspects of a single soul, or is it perhaps a parable about both the ancient and modern Middle East? Indeed, might we not wonder if this journey is not psychedelic in nature: a journey into the unknown recesses of the mind; a trip to a place filled with our greatest wonders and fears? In reality, no one ever will know the answers to these questions. Each of us must confront these four sojourners on their own terms. ¿Are we not their co-travelers on the endless seas of time? Like our ancestor Jacob, we too must wrestle with what we see and with that which lies below the surface of our own lives.

Over these high holidays let us take a journey to this magical orchard not only to learn its insights about the year that has just ended and the year to come, but also about who we were and about what we hope to become. Tonight we ask: ¿What does Rabbi Azzai’s death teach us? Tomorrow we seek to learn:¿What can we learn from the madness of Rabbi Ben Zoma? On Kol Nidre we try to confront the Abuya’s apostasy? And on Yom Kippur day we begin to heal by asking: ¿What was so unique about Akiba that only he emerged unscathed? ¿What can their experiences teach us, who live in a different millennium and in a different place?

As we sit here in this magnificent new building each of us may see a different side of the pardes, the magical orchard. For most of us, Aggieland is an orchard filled with the fruit of knowledge and fortunately few of us do know the pain of abject poverty. Like the Talmudic orchard our world too is filled with opportunities to pluck the fruit of wisdom

and to transform it into life's successes. Yet as we learned just a few weeks ago, the madness of murder is never totally removed even from our community.

Tonight, we begin our journey into the year 5773. Let's look back on the place, the year, from which we have just emerged. According to Jewish custom, this is the evening when place and time merge into an eternal time-place continuum. ¿What was 5772 like for you? ¿What events symbolized the year now ended?

Like so many years before it, 5772 was a year of successes and tragedies. It was a year of world economic hardships and scientific breakthroughs, a year of devastating famines and questions about the state of our economy. Hearing so many political speeches from both sides of the aisle might we wonder if 5772 was not a year of "flights from reality"? It was a year of senseless acts of violence, not only in this country, but also in our own community. From shootings in Colorado to College Station, from New York to Brazil, we have become so inured to pain and suffering that reality appears to be nothing more than a mere television spectacle. The plague of hate and of random acts of violence has turned ivory towers of learning into valleys of tears. Although public shootings grabbed the headlines of an ever-increasingly journalism in which truth is all too often sacrificed to political expediency, it is the tragedy of the economy that gnaws away at the very fabric of Western society. Not only did we watch government misspending on levels never before seen, but it is highly likely that young people graduating from colleges and universities will be ill equipped to enter into the work force, and will have to face the reality that their lives will be economically less successful than those of their parents. The next generation may be caught in a squeeze in which it pays ever increasingly higher taxes for a national debt that is out of control while having fewer economic opportunities in a world in which employment often goes to those who pay their workers the least. We only have to look at Western European nations' economies to understand that if we are not careful, their fate may well await us.

And in the world in which we live, both terrorism and ethnic cleansing have become routine. From forced starvations to forced marches, from Iraq to Iran from a questionable war in Afghanistan to senseless mass murder in Syria and back to Libya, as in the case of

Rabbi Azzai we have come to accept not only death as a part of life, but also murder. How do we deal with the desecration of our embassies on the pretext of being insulted by a film, the murder of American diplomats in Libya, and the bomb threats against the Universities of Texas and North Dakota? Are these acts proof that we are witnesses to a world gone mad or merely to a media that has lost touch with reality? The world's refusal to stop Iran's pursuit of an atomic bomb so as to finish Hitler's work and then watching in silence as Assad systematically murders innocent civilians across Syria demonstrates that despite all of our scientific achievements, we humans have not yet learned the lesson of Cain and Able, yes we are our brother's keeper.

¿What has caused this hardness of heart? ¿How does the never-ending flow of murder for murder's own sake affect our theology and commitment to each other? If 5772 is remembered for anything, it may be that this past year is when all too many people forgot that "lo tizrach/thou shalt not murder" is a universal commandment and not a mere suggestion.

Let us return then to Rabbi Azzai's life and see if in the lacunae of the Talmudic text, kernels of wisdom can be found that might provide us with guidance.

Like so many of the Talmudic figures, the life of Rabbi Azzai is hidden under a cloud of ignorance. The text tells us almost nothing, other than that he looked too deeply. Rabbi Azzai saw the components of the garden but never its whole; he sought to dissect it to the point that he lost its meaning. ¿Could Rabbi Azzai symbolize the complete disconnect and the loss of communication within society, or perhaps the fanaticism that is the Middle East? Is Rabbi Azzai symbolic of political systems in which politicians believe that it is better to win than to be moral, that politics is merely a sporting-event without consequences? Does Rabbi Azzai's death symbolize the death of hope?

To a great sense, this anger, this retreat from the real world, is symbolic of so much of our modern life. ¿Were the murders of Jewish school children in France not symbolic of the world's random hate; the desire to hurt another just to prove a point or to feel "better" about oneself?

Rabbi Azzai lived a life in which darkness invaded the realm of the obvious. We, nevertheless, cannot allow ourselves to become so blinded by the “evil” that exists in the world, that we fail to note the good. Judaism is a religion of hope, not of death. We are told that in the face of death, we choose life, where there is prejudice, we show love; where there is anger, we practice compassion.

The year that ended with the setting of the sun was not an easy year. Yet we dare not let ourselves become its victims. In our orchard we have a plethora of opportunities and much goodness surrounds us.

It is too easily to suffer from disenchantment. As Jews it is our job to find re-enchantment. How do we find this re-enchantment? First, let us reconnect with our spirituality. For too long we Jews have suffered from an overload of logic. We have so embraced the scientific that we have forgotten that the spiritual is not at odds with science, but rather its complement. Although we can never stop another from hating us, we do not have to hate. We may never prevent an earthquake, but because the earth shakes, does not mean that we need to permit the ethical foundations upon which we build our lives from being shaken. The legacy of Rabbi Azzai on this Rosh Ha’Shanah, then, is that it is each of us who must decide how we will emerge from the journey of life. ¿Are we capable of challenging hate with love? Tonight we begin our journey anew in a new place and in a new time; as we enter this new orchard, may we use its fruit wisely, not stopping to stare at life, but to participate fully in it.

Amen