

Drash – Bereshit, 10/17/2020

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## **Let There Be Light: Transparency, Connections and Mechitzas**

With Bereshit: no antecedents, no commandments, all new. The beginning. The creation.

"Let There Be Light." So many interpretations of this line. I gravitate toward those that are larger, more social or anthropological. The light is not Torah or Judaism, or monotheism or any ism. For me it's nature vs. collective nurture. Nature vs. Civilization. Or how we civilize our nature, which will forever remain brutish.

The Light is the civilizing force. First of several things called "good." Like a mechitza, it separated day from darkness, but God does not say that darkness is bad.

The first thing that we're told is bad is simply that it exists with the good – both of which are "found" from or in the tree of knowledge (2:9). Knowledge is godlike. We are told that we are made in God's image and now, having eaten from the tree, we have godlike knowledge too. To some, and I tend this way, it is the other way around; we create God in our image.

This notion of which comes first, the chicken or the egg, God or people, is well captured in the poem that Abbey Bellows, a few weeks back, and then Alys Cohen on Yom Kippur, read: "I believe," by Yehuda Amichai:

I assert with absolute faith that prayer preceded God.

Prayers created God.

God created humans.

Humans create prayers that create God who creates humanity.

There is something circular here about our relationship with God, that is anchored by or connected by prayer.

Also circular or connected is the presence of good and evil. Both are with us. But then they also are within God, if we are created in its image. That God can do or inspire evil becomes clear quickly; lots of smiting ahead, which will begin shortly in the story of Noah. Mass extinction, genocide, war-making and complete slaughter of non-belligerents is to come. Not a lot of light to be found there.

But the lessons we tend to emphasize are those about the light, which, perhaps, we can only see in relation to what is bad.

Take the matter of nakedness. It's fine in the Garden of Eden, for example. Or for any couple in their own world. It's also okay in an artist's studio. Or skinny dipping somewhere remote. There are any number of places where nudity is Good. Even recently in Pennsylvania, as election nerds

among us may know, where there is a problem with mail-in ballots that has been called naked ballots. Voters who don't insert their ballot into a secrecy envelope before inserting it into the mailing envelope have their ballots rejected. So, some local public officials and some actors, male and female, including Sarah Silverman, have taken off their clothes in photos and video to promote NOT submitting naked ballots.

And yes, there are some places where nakedness isn't good. And this is where I have a story I want to share in the spirit of storyteller Bob Rovinsky, whose yarzeit we are observing. At one of the shiva minyanim for his passing, I shared one of Bob's stories with Renana in which he was consciously provocative; he knew that what he would say would startle people. Renana said that he loved doing that, and affirmed that he definitely would do that on purpose.

So in Bob's spirit, I want to talk about a personal experience with nakedness.

Starting in the late 1980s, Ellen co-officiated high holiday services for GW w/ Gerry Serrotta, which she did for 15 yrs. This story is about one of the first ones in the old Marvin Center Ballroom.

Upon sitting down in the congregation on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, I noticed a young woman, presumably a student, one or two rows in front of me, a few seats to the right. I could only see her back, but I could see all of it. She was wearing a gauzy transparent white dress, notably from the waist up without any other article of clothing. And yes, I noticed. Every time we had to stand up, this woman revealed the barest of panties. I noticed. It was difficult. My wife was on the bima. my daughter and mother-in-law were to my left (Carl wasn't born yet) and I hoped my mother-in-law didn't notice – either the woman, or me noticing her. Using my machzor as a mechitza would not quite work.

I did not have a particularly spiritual start to Rosh Hashanah that year.

But I did gain insight into mechitzas. For me, it took an effectively naked woman in front of me – at high holidays! Now, who's to say for someone else that it wouldn't take the slope of a clothed shoulder, or the curve of a chin or the shine in an eye, to offer a distraction? Even Jimmy Carter famously told us in Playboy that he lusted after women in his heart, but not in reality, presumably due to some sense of a civilizing light.

I share this story, yes to provoke, but also to illustrate how constantly, and even in the unlikeliest places or times, a civilizing light is needed (even when it may not be wanted). And how the light only becomes clear in the presence of what's on the other side of our mechitzas – not just things that are bad, but are repeatedly shown to be bad. Again, not darkness.

We are stiff-necked – just as God is – and need the repetition, as we'll find in the volume and redundancy of the stories to come. Whether we are dense, lazy, inattentive or stiff-necked, we apparently do need to be hit over the head with them.

There are plenty of examples of our being slow to act. In another context, it took eight minutes and forty-six seconds of a man with his knee on someone's neck to provide enough light, to prompt people to act?

So the light – or, perhaps, transparency (a different kind than that woman's dress) is a better word, as it implies a relationship to other things, or is like prayer, as a connection between us and however we define our God – is the best way to counter the evil. But without the evil in our nature to prompt the light, or need the light, or give it value, would the light go out?

(Discussion)

The reason I asked John if I could do this drash is a creation story of a different kind. I turn into art the driftwood I find while scavenging the shores of the Chesapeake in my kayak. Behind me is a piece that I finished last winter. It consists of three pieces of wood on my dining room wall. I'll show it up closer in a minute to those of you who are interested and able; Rhonda, when you were last here, I think you touched one if not two of these pieces. The first piece, this one on the left, I found and finished many years ago. I thought it was like the World Cup trophy, but I made it horizontal, as a stand-alone table-top piece, and called it something lame like Horn of Plenty. These other two pieces I found separately, but because of the similarity, I put them together unfinished, outside in a bed of stones, and also horizontally. Then I realized these three pieces needed to be together. I finished the other two and put them together vertically, as you see here. To me, they are three torches, and I called it "Three Torches" at first, another lame entry. I'm embarrassed to say I even toyed with calling it Torch Song Trilogy. And then I realized. I needed to name it "Let There Be Light," hence my inspiration for doing today's drash.

Shabbat shalom.

