

I. Being Nourished by the Flowing River
Erev Rosh HaShanah
Wednesday, September 12, 2007

High Holy Days 5768
Rabbi Scott Meltzer
Ohr Shalom Synagogue

“A congregant walks up to the rabbi after the service – ‘Thank you rabbi. I really enjoyed the service, and especially your sermon. I am on my way to have lunch with friends and I know they are going to ask me about your sermon. Do you think you could tell me what you said in one sentence?’ ‘Sure,’ says the Rabbi, ‘not a problem.’ ‘Then why didn’t you the first time?’”

I love that little quip. A lot. Maybe not as much as some of you, but a lot.

We are just at the very beginning of our journey together into this New Year, and into a lot of hours of services, and a goodly number of sermons. Those of you who have been here in years past know that it is important to me that my sermons all build together around a single theme, and that each can be summarized into a single sentence. And, in general, I will tell you what that one sentence is, so you don’t need to ask.

Though, if anybody does come up to me and ask me if I can summarize the sermon into one sentence, even before you give me the punch line, I will at least know that you were listening to the beginning of my remarks tonight.

During the coming days, and hopefully for the coming year, I want to share some of what I learned during my amazing adventure this past summer in Israel.

And I don’t just want to tell stories, though that would probably be more entertaining. I want us to really do the work, together, similar to the work I did for over one-hundred fifty hours at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

If you would like to hear stories, I encourage you to read the Journal that Jennifer and I kept while in Israel this summer. It is still available on the website, and there are also a number of print copies floating around.

But I want us to break our teeth on texts. I want us to actively engage the tradition, mine the wealth of our literary path, to learn who we are as individuals and as a people.

Guaranteed, some of you will come up to me after services and ask me why I didn’t talk about something relevant, something useful, something important.

I promise you that I have chosen to speak on exactly those things that I believe are the most relevant, the most useful and the most important for all of us.

Back in the early nineties, I spent an August weekend with Reb Shlomo, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach of blessed memory, on Cape Cod with about 75 other students studying to become rabbis. Saturday night, he indulged us with a concert and Shlomo stories for a couple of hours. In the midst of his concert, he made a plea to us. He said: Boys and girls, in a couple of weeks you will be serving congregation for Yontiff, when you speak to them, he said, don’t read them the New York Times. They read the New York Times already. They don’t need you for that. Boys and girls, he continued, read them Torah. They need you, the shul, the Holy Days and Judaism for Torah, not for the New York Times.

And he was right. Many of you read the New York Times, watch CNN. You don't need me for that. In fact, if you want to hear about World News, there are people here within our own congregation who could do a better job of presenting it.

I could also just give the end of the story, the punch line, what Judaism says about: the war in Iraq and how it should end, peace in the Middle East, Health Care in America, the economy, the coming presidential election, and one hundred other important and timely subjects.

But those are lectures or classes to give to the rest of the world – in the university, at a lecture series.

Here we are, together, a community, a shul, a group of families joining together as one family. And instead of giving you a Jewish reading of an issue, I want to teach you and excite you to read Jewishly.

I want to open up, together in the coming days, books of our tradition, read them together, and from our tradition talk about what it means to live and breathe Jewish. By the time we arrive at the eleventh day of this New Year, we should together be further along in understanding how we, as members of this people, this covenant, are called upon to behave in this world, from what we say, to how we say it, from how we care for ourselves and each other, to how we care for strangers. And this should influence how we think and feel about all the stories in the New York Times and on CNN.

Ready to begin?

I want us to each look at our grand view of the whole world: what it is and how we fit into it. In order to do that, we need to go back to the very, very beginning. Today is Rosh HaShanah, the birthday of the world, הַיּוֹם הַרִבֵּי עוֹלָם. So we are going to do work on Cosmology, that is, what the world is like, but to do so, we are going to study Cosmogony, where the world comes from.

Most people, in their minds, jump to the first creation story, when I mention the origins of the universe, at least in a religious setting. You know, six days of work, lights first, humanity last, and then Shabbat.

Powerful, wonderful cosmogony, creation story. But I find the second one to be even more powerful, even more directly relevant to us as creatures in the world system. In the first creation story, we are almost the last thing created, almost the pinnacle or zenith. After making us, God can rest. After finishing us, God can call the world complete.

Heady stuff for us humans. But it is in the second cosmogony, creation of the world story, where I believe the cosmology more directly resembles the world in which we live.

Whereas in the first story, the driving force of the story is God's power and God's plan, in the second story, the driving force is relationship. God make Adam first, with God's own hands. God kisses him to bring it to life. God builds a garden, not before as part of a plan, but after, in reaction to this budding relationship between God and Adam.

God empathically sense Adam's loneliness and creates the animals to try to bring Adam wholeness. When that fails, God understand that Adam needs a partner, a mate that is like him, in order to complete him. And so God makes Eve. A powerful story about relationships and overcoming the atomization of life – and this was thousands of years before existentialist authors told us that we were each all alone!

And there is a powerful sadness at the end of the story. Adam and Eve become one flesh and discover the power, comfort and wholeness of intimate relationship, but God remains alone. There is a profound sense of Aloneness present in God's Oneness. Monotheism may be wonderfully comforting for humans, but it seems to be awfully lonely for God.

So what does cosmogony present to us as cosmology? What does this story about the origin of the world teach us about the nature of the world?

First, the world is all about relationships. Have no doubt about it. The single most important things in our lives are the most important people in our lives. It is our most intimate circle, our innermost kevutzah, chevre, that gives us the possibility of wholeness.

We also live at a time where even the model of that single most intimate relationship, Adam and Eve, boy and girl becoming one flesh, is reflective but not exhaustive of the wholeness of which Torah speaks.

There are many people whose ability to overcome loneliness in this world centers on their own Adam and Eve-like relationship. But we all know many people who discover life's deepest intimacy not as husband and wife, but for some it is best friends, sisters, partners. There are people who create this connectedness even as grown-up child and parent.

We all need to create, strengthen and celebrate our primal, most intimate relationship.

But that is only part of the story.

God is still in the relationship. God who created them. God who made the clothes for them, to protect and comfort them, before sending them on their journey. God is still part of the relationship.

In fact the rest of the Bible, and even the rest of human history, is about the relationships between peoples, and the relationships between people and God.

You need to make a choice: one either actively participates in this relationship with God, or one cuts this off.

Do you want to be connected to the energy of Goodness in this universe? Do you want to see yourself as a reflection of and in relationship to the Beauty of this world? Do you believe that there is a great and perfect love that is in this world or at least possible in this world? Do you believe there is nobility in this world? An energy of righteousness? Do you believe that there is an invisible reality in our world, inspiring, challenging? Do

you believe that there is something of significance in this world? Something more important than happy or feel good? Do you believe that the world matters? That your presence within it matters?

These are not questions to be taken lightly. But if you are willing to acknowledge a “yes” to all or part of what I just said, then please travel with me a little bit more, and every time I say God, picture your “yes” to whichever of those questions you answered in the affirmative.

So how do those things, Good, Beauty, Love, enter this world? And why is there so much evidence to their absence?

Those are cosmology questions, what is the world like, let’s look to cosmogony, how the world came to be, to answer them.

According to Genesis 2, after God created Adam, what did God do? God planted a garden for Adam and placed Adam in it, God did the initial plantings, and then verse 10 (you have it on page 1 of the sermon texts handout):

וְנָהָר יֵצֵא מֵעֵדֶן לְהַשְׁקוֹת אֶת-הַגָּן. And a river flows from Eden to water the garden.

In the simple reading of Genesis, this appears to be the irrigation system for the garden. In the cosmology of the Zohar, it is much, much more.

The Zohar understands this river not to be simply a water source for a garden. The Zohar understands that this river is the connection from Eden to the garden, and it carries the water.

Read, or more precisely, decoded according to the Zohar, Eden is God, the garden is comprised of God’s choicest trees – you and me, the humans of creation. And the water is that Goodness, or Godliness, or Beauty that sustains us, and sustains this world. And the river is the connection that allows God to send Goodness to us and to this world, or rather the river is that which carries the water from Eden to the garden.

Notice that the verb is a present tense verb – an incredibly rare occurrence in the Bible – things either happened or will happen. But here it is a stative condition – the river flows, or is flowing.

In the eyes of the Zohar, this is a constant condition. God is sending blessing, bounty, love at all times. The challenge is that even though the river is always flowing, the garden is not always open to receive it. The world is a beautiful, loving place, but if our eyes are closed to it, if we shut off ourselves from it, if we refuse to allow our roots to be nourished from the water in the river, the water is still there, but we wither and die, spiritually.

What happens if we don’t pay attention or work to receive the flow? The Midrash teaches, number two on that same page:

When the Holy One, blessed be God, created the first person, God took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said to him, ' Behold My

works, how beautiful and commendable they are! All that I have created, for your sake I created it. Pay heed that you do not corrupt and destroy My universe; for if you corrupt it there is no one to repair it after you.

-*Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:20*

So the trees of the garden are the people of this world. So we have a collective responsibility to see that every tree gets watered. We are actually responsible to care for all of the trees by trying to connect them with the flow of water. Now in fairness, a metaphor one doesn't often hear, but you can lead a tree to water, but you can't make it drink.

True. But that cannot be an excuse not to try. Somehow when it is our children we are talking about, we don't give up getting them to drink so easily. And we shouldn't give up on others as well.

We need to learn to imbibe deeply from the flow of blessing that God sends into this world. We need to live constantly extending our roots to be nourished by the Good, the Loving, the Beauty.

If you are willing to see the world as nourished by this constant flow, that God is constantly flowing Goodness/Godliness through the river into you and me, the garden, then the Zohar is going to topple another of the great assumptions of what happened in the Bible.

So we all know the biblical story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, right? So here's the million dollar question, who kicked whom out?

Look at the Zohar, text number 3. Remember the garden is now the people, you and I are the trees, so it is hard to picture trees leaving. But the Zohar's issue is not that trees don't generally walk, it is understanding that nothing can interrupt God's flow into this world. So God could not have separated us from the flow.

Instead:

וַיִּגְרֹשׁ אֶת־הָאָדָם . א"ר אלעזר. לא ידענא מאן עביד תרוכין למאן. אי קב"ה עבד תרוכין לאדם. אי לא. אבל מלה אתהפיק. ויגרש את. א"ת דייקא. ומאן גרש את. האדם. האדם. ודאי גרש את. ובגין דא כתיב וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ ה' אֱלֹקִים מִגִּ'ע. אמאי וישלחוהו. בגין דגרש אדם את כדקאמרן.

AND HE DROVE OUT THE MAN. R. Eleazar said: We naturally suppose that "he" is the subject and "man" the object. The truth is, however, that "man" is the subject and the object is the accusative particle *eth*, so that we render "and the man drove out *eth*". Hence it is written, "And God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden", for the reason that he had divorced *eth*, as we have explained.

So Adam and Eve stopped the flow, divorced the "Et", expelled the Shechinah. God did not punish or expel, we threw out God and then discovered how radically our world changed.

Radical thinking. This is not religion as escapism from hard life, this is the ultimate in personal responsibility. Not only did Adam and Eve sin by eating the fruit, they actually divorced themselves from God. Punishment was not vengeance from God, it was the consequence of removing themselves from the flow.

So where are you? Are you willing to live your life reflecting the world the way you see it? Are you willing to accept that there is Goodness in this world and therefore work to be a reflection of that goodness? Are you willing to accept that there is Love and Beauty and Truth, and that you can choose to live in their presence?

You have the power, the choice, to live in the world of your choosing. Why not choose a world of Goodness? You can stand in the flow. You can drink and be nourished by the waters.

This is not some crazy kool-aid, some other-worldly mumbo jumbo. We need not be skeptical, cynical or jaded. We need to be loving and good.

And if you feel lost from the river, cut off from the flow of blessings in this world. It is okay. The river flows, we just need to help reconnect you.

That is our work as a community, as friends, with our intimates, we need to tend the garden. We need to help all the trees receive water.

Do you want to know what we do as a synagogue, as a community? Sure we celebrate holidays and lifecycle events, we send out lots of mailings, we celebrate and mourn, we support and grow, but what we really do is create the space and time in which we each can receive the waters flowing from Eden and grow as a garden together.

We are not simply a group of people. We are a community, and not simply a community but a blossoming garden.

God, who blesses this world with the waters of Eden, let this be a year in which we make ourselves passionate recipients of the flow of Your goodness. As we make ourselves open to Your bounty, fill us with Your blessing. May this be a good, fruitful year for us individually, in our closest relationships and as a community. Amein.