

Yom Kippur 2012/5773

Drashah: **One and Only**

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A Jewish grandmother loses her grandson at the beach when a tidal wave sweeps him away into the depths of the ocean. The grandmother immediately bows to her knees in the sand and prays to God for the return of her grandson. "Please God, I have always been a good person, a good Jew and a loving grandmother; please return my grandson to me."

Just as she finishes her prayer, a huge wave crashes back on the beach, returning the young boy to his grandmother's side. The grandmother begins to cry and hug her grandson whom she thought she would never see again. She is overcome with joy and gratitude.

She looks once more at her grandson, looks back at the sky and yells, "He had a hat!!!"

We Jews take pride in and laugh at how *chutzpadik* we can be, even to God. But prayer, even the most audacious, isn't really about chutzpah. It's about something much more basic.

Rabbi Bill Lebeau, my teacher and mentor in rabbinical school who later became its Dean and my first boss when I was the Assistant Dean of the school, used his stories as a successful pulpit rabbi over several decades as the texts from which we were to learn about the thrills and the terrors of becoming a rabbi.

One Shabbat as a rookie rabbi at his first pulpit in Port Jefferson, Long Island, a few minutes before Rabbi Lebeau was going to recite the *Mi Sheberach*, the prayer for healing, he was approached on the bimah by an older gentleman. The man said to him, (in shuls where there's a cantor, even the rabbi can talk a little bit during services), "Rabbi, please pray for my wife. She's in the hospital and has taken a turn for the worse." Rabbi Lebeau asked for her name and included her in the prayer he then recited for all the sick in the congregation.

The next Shabbat the same man approached Rabbi Lebeau and said, "Rabbi, you are the best rabbi in the entire world. Last Shabbat you said a prayer for my wife who was in terrible crisis. The next day she turned a corner and is coming home tomorrow. You are the best rabbi ever!"

For a brief second, Rabbi Lebeau was filled with pride and relief. And the next second, he panicked. What if this man's wife hadn't recovered? What if she had died? What kind of rabbi would he be then?

We sat there waiting for Rabbi Lebeau to continue his story. He didn't. That was the end of the story. But of course that wasn't the end of the teaching.

What did that man really want from Rabbi Lebeau? What did he receive that made him think Rabbi Lebeau was the world's greatest rabbi (which, by the way, he just might be)?

He didn't actually think Rabbi Lebeau was capable of healing his wife. Why would Rabbi Lebeau's prayer be any more effective than his own

prayers for his wife? If his wife hadn't recovered, would he really have come up to Rabbi Lebeau and proclaimed him the world's worst rabbi?

So what was he seeking exactly?

Rabbi Art Green has also been one of my most cherished guides, though he and I have never met face to face. Gifted as more than a scholar of Jewish mysticism, Rabbi Green's mastery lies in his ability to render into modern, intelligible idiom the deepest layers of kabbalistic thought with exquisite sensitivity and poetic eloquence. Read his writings.

I am not a teacher of Kabbalah, and I hesitate to even say I am a student of Kabbalah. I humbly approach the wellsprings of Hassidic and mystical texts and teachings and dip my cup ever so slightly into the waters where each drop can quench a lifetime thirst of wandering and wondering with thoughts profound and filling. My efforts are to share with you what it is I have learned and the wisdom that feeds my hunger for understanding and for meaning.

In a beautiful piece he wrote for a volume called Healing and the Jewish Imagination, one that informs much of what I will share today, Rabbi Green makes the subtle and gentle distinction between "healing" and "a cure". While of course everyone who faces an illness or that of a loved one prays for a cure, what so often is sought with as much yearning by the patient and the loved ones -- sometimes even for themselves -- is what we call healing.

There are those amongst us whose bodies are ill and struggling. For and with them we yearn for a cure to their suffering. But the healing of which I

speak encompasses those whose bodies are sick and those whose aren't to include all of us who find ourselves too often weakened and even diminished in our daily struggles to live the lives of which we dream and to help the ones we love do the same. Our hunger and thirst today are but physical echoes of our cravings for wholeness and peace amidst imperfect relationships, the pressures to succeed, financial insecurities, parenting crises, and the changes that life relentlessly, and sometimes even recklessly, throws at us.

Healing, Rabbi Green notes, "begins with the gift of empathy, companionship and being present." That, more than anything else, is what Rabbi Lebeau offered the man who worried about his sick wife. That, more than anything else, is what we seek today, Yom Kippur, from one another, and from God.

We come to shul on Yom Kippur and we pray, we plead, we sing, we cry – we yearn to feel balanced in whom we are and what we're doing with our lives. But we don't expect magical resolutions to our problems. That's not why we daven.

The Talmud says, "Crying out is good for a person, whether before or after the decree has been issued." Clearly, explains Rabbi Green, what is positive about prayer is not its ability to change or cure our circumstances. There is healing to be sought beyond or underneath the specifics of our situations, healing that brings us the sense that our pain has been acknowledged, that helps us bridge the isolation that our struggles unleash.

As he wrote: "I do not know much about the power of prayer to affect others: to heal the sick, to bring home the lost, to protect those we love from harm...But I know that prayer heals the one who prays, restoring a wholeness or a balance that can be lost when we are beset by concern or worry. And since the One who lies within us, to whom we give the words of prayer, lies as well within the heart of the one for whom we pray, we would indeed be setting false and unnecessary limits to say that the energy of our love, expressed in that prayer, cannot reach the other."

But then, with a tender bluntness, Rabbi Green points out that our personal healing from illness or crises is, at the end of the day, inconsequential, regardless of how much it matters to us and our loved ones. "The world will go on without us", he reminds us, in case we've allowed ourselves to forget. "Generations in families come and go, some longer, some shorter. The real healing that is needed is not only of the sick and the bereaved, but of the whole human situation."

In the grand scheme of things, our own troubles matter very little. It's hard to hear, hard to accept. Sadly, it's true. But while our own particular destinies might be of little consequence, our personal contributions to the larger narrative of human healing and cosmic repair are critical.

What is that narrative? What is it that is so broken in our world? How have we contributed to that brokenness, how can we atone for our role in it, and how can we help heal it?

Rabbi Green shares one of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's teachings on the tragic human predicament of feeling alone and dislocated, cut off from

the vitality, affirmation and integration that give our lives meaning, endlessly longing to reunite with our divine Source.

In the teaching, Rabbi Nachman speaks of a spring on a mountain that represents the Source of all Life, and a heart, representing the life of all things, standing on opposite sides of the world from each other. The heart and the spring yearn for each other, crying out for one another, but are never able to come together. Every time the heart begins to move toward the mountaintop where the spring stands, the mountaintop disappears from view. The life of the heart is sustained only by its gazing upon the spring. If the spring were to disappear, the heart would surely die, and the world would cease to exist.

“For this reason”, wrote Rabbi Nachman, “the heart can never approach the spring, but ever stands opposite it and looks at it in longing.”

The tragedy of our lives, explains Rabbi Green, is that we constantly long to be united with our Source but we can't get any closer than we already are. Think of the words of the psalm we sing these high holy days, “*Achat sha'alti me'et Hashem...shivti b'veyt Adonai...lachazot b'noam hashem ulevaker b'heychalol* / one thing I seek from Adonai...to dwell in Your home...to gaze upon your graciousness and visit Your sanctuary.”

This is the brokenness, the alienation that we must repair. This is the sin at the root of all sins for which we need to atone. This is the healing our Jewish tradition must offer, says Rabbi Green: to bring us out from the narrow confines of our personal, daily consciousness, our *Mitzrayim*, and help us discover the deeper connection that sustains all of creation; to broaden and deepen our inner vision so that we don't lose sight of the

One with whom we yearn to unite; the healing, he says, that transforms our prayers of “Baruch Ata/Blessed are You, the Other” into the inclusive, unifying singular divine breath of “Anochi/I am”.

On some level, there is a purpose to our separateness. We experience ourselves as distinct creatures, peoples and nations because we need to do so in order to live our everyday lives: to have relationships, create families, build civilizations. But our separateness is merely an illusion, an artificial dualism that allows us to function in the world. The point of being separated from one another is only and ultimately to be able to gaze upon each other and sense the connection between us. We step back from each other only in order to be able to see each other more clearly, and then relate to each other with more kindness, compassion and empathy, caring for each other as the unified, bounded, and singular creation that we together make up.

It is this simple but profound concept that changed my prayer life dramatically within the last few years. I struggled all my years with the idea of a divine Being separate from nature and creation who controlled, or chose not to control, the world and its workings. Saying the words “Baruch Ata /Blessed are You”, neither knowing if such a You existed or whom this You might even be, presented an uncomfortable challenge to me, over and over again, each and every day. And then I began to understand the deeper meaning of the “You” as a constructed, imagined “other” from within the indivisible One to which I know I am connected; a You I invoke to be able to better look at and contemplate the One we truly are. Now when I say “Baruch Ata/ Blessed are You”, I feel I’m taking a step back from that sometimes overwhelming sense of oneness in order

to take a look at Life itself, to reflect upon the single Soul that lives with in my personal soul.

Like the parable of Rabbi Nachman, we've all had those moments of illumination when we feel one with a larger reality, when we feel deeply and powerfully connected to one another, when we've had in our sights the spring at the other end of the world -- and not only in the abstract sense. When a father cries tears for his sick child, when we feel the ache in our heart for the suffering of someone we love, when a friend's pulse pounds watching another friend race to the finish line, when a lover's soul thrills to the success of their partner or is humbled at their demise, when enemies, even for an instant, redden with shame for inflicting pain on one another, we physically feel the singular reality which connects and animates all of our lives. We feel, we know, we are but One.

On a darker note, I will never forget, in the days following 9/11, which were the very days of Teshuvah leading to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, how haunted I was by the human capacity for evil, a capacity I knew I must somehow share because I, like the terrorists then and now, am a human being, connected to all other human beings.

Our tragedy, our sin, is that understanding this precious revelation and taking responsibility for it is fleeting. When it eludes us, or worse, when we avoid it, we make each individual human life a symbol of the separation we endure from the deeper Oneness that bounds us to one another and to the Divine. When we manage to be mindful of our fundamental connection to one another we embody the divine Oneness. More often, though, we lose sight of the whole of which we are but a part, and our

individuality becomes not a potential path to wholeness, but a certain path to brokenness.

I find myself returning again and again to an image drawn by Rabbi Rami Shapiro of the waves in the ocean as a compelling illustration of these difficult concepts the mystics invite us to embrace.

Each wave in the ocean is distinct by virtue of its height, width, power and lifespan. Yet, when each crashes on the shore, as each inevitably does, its essence returns to the body of water from which it came, and gets reabsorbed into the singular reality of the ocean of which it was made.

Human life is no different. Through the process of individuation we aim to sculpt lives filled with meaning and purpose, some successfully, some less so, creating separate living illustrations of the mystery and majesty that is at the core of all human existence. But we are each derived from the singular essence of life, each of us is sourced from a common reality some call God or Nature, a reality from which over the course of our lives we separate, and to which we return upon our deaths.

The tragedy of our lives lies in both our not being aware of this fundamental unity, and, upon sensing our dislocation, not knowing where to find it. It is the pain of being separated from our Source that spirituality seeks to mitigate while we are here, even as it tries to show us our way home.

My colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein understands the Book of Jonah, which we'll chant at Minchah, as teaching us these same lessons. In an essay in a recent volume of the journal *Sh'ma*, he describes Jonah as a man who

thrived on the illusions of separateness we build for ourselves. He lived in a world of us and them, our people and those people, insiders and outsiders. He knew who he was because he knew who he wasn't. He knew who he had to serve as a prophet and with whom he didn't need to concern himself. Then one day, God came and shattered his perfectly delineated world. "Go to Nineveh and save that city from its wickedness." Nineveh? The enemies of Israel who destroyed our Northern Kingdom in 722BCE, exiled our people, attacked Jerusalem and looted it? Why would Jonah want to save Nineveh? They were the quintessential "other"!

God's charge to Jonah, one he tries hard to evade, is precisely to undermine the idea that the world is divided between "us" and "them". God is the unity beneath all divisions; the wholeness behind all separations. As Rabbi Feinstein puts it, "The prophet of either/or is confronted by the God of both/and." There can be no such thing as caring for our own and not for the other – as individuals or as a people -- because in God, the Source of Life, the Source of all our lives, there exist no such divisions.

Jonah panics in the face of the existential confusion this unleashes. "If we're not us and they're not them, then who am I?" To escape his dread, he jumps onto a ship and goes into a deep sleep down in the hold. When the ship hits a storm, the captain finds him and yells, "How can you sleep?"

This, Rabbi Feinstein argues, is *the* question of the book: How can you sleep and be oblivious to the chaos outside? This is the major question for us today: How can we remain oblivious to the brokenness that threatens

our world every minute of every day? To the alienation and loneliness we feel in a world where we're more connected than ever? To the bitter rifts between cultures that know each other better and better and yet understand each other less and less? To the political and military fractures that threaten every major region in the world and, God forbid, the future of the State of Israel?

How dare we sleep? How dare we slumber while the world ruptures before our very eyes? While the Oneness that we know, that we feel, that our Torah teaches is the foundation of all life, is rendered invisible by our narrow, limited, and superficial vision? How can we wake up and open our eyes and hearts to the reality of the unity of all creation and live within its light?

The only way we can approach healing towards wholeness is through the particulars of our own lives, Rabbi Green notes paradoxically. For while our own alienation and pain might not have cosmic consequences, as he said earlier, they do need to be addressed, we must each learn to live mindful of the Oneness of creation, but we must understand our personal efforts as part of the larger, ongoing need for tikkun that is the universal human story.

Difficult as this may be to understand, let alone undertake, our Jewish tradition provides a frame, and Kabbalah, with the help of Rabbi Green's insights, the instructions.

The Mishnah states that the world rests on three pillars: Torah, Avodah/service or devotion, and Gemilut Chassadim/acts of lovingkindness.

According to the mystical tradition, the reason we were exiled from the Garden of Eden is for having separated the Tree of Knowledge from its roots in the Tree of Life. When we gather information about the world for our own personal curiosity and erudition and neglect to use our knowledge for the healing of self, others and the natural world around us, we cut off the wisdom of this tree from its life source of insight, compassion and change that are integral to the health and sustainability of our world, and we unleash the forces of detachment which separate and imperil us.

But when we realize that the knowledge we gain comes with the responsibility to live it, not just know it, to use it for good, not just file it, then the notions of “my truth “ versus “your truth”, “my perspective” versus “your perspective” will cease to divide us and instead bind us in a process of learning that seeks ethical and as well as intellectual refinement. This is Torah in its most glorious form – wisdom to live by, not gloat in. Reuniting the Tree of Knowledge with the Tree of Life is key to restoring the wholeness the world enjoyed in its most perfect state.

Opening our minds to this consciousness helps us to recognize our ultimate role here on earth: to serve as an image of God, to embody the connectedness and unity that sustains the universe.

This Avodah, this work in the service of healing the fractured heart of the world, begins with healing our own hearts.

When our souls are connected to the singular Soul of the universe, the Kabbalah says we become connected to infinite amounts of energy that revolve around two different poles. One pole Rabbi Green calls a center

of love-energy. We feel loved and blessed and seek to pass on that love and that blessing to those around us. We connect to spouses with deep intimacy, we bear children, and we extend love to others. The other pole feels this energy as a love of self, a yearning for strength and power.

Much of our human experience revolves around the tension between wanting to give love, share blessing, allow this energy within us to flow out and through others, and holding back, withdrawing even, preserving this energy for our own vigor and vitality. Restoring wholeness to the universe will require us to live in this tension with greater awareness and balance.

But with this tension comes another, what Rabbi Green calls the tension between the demands of perfectionism and the grace of self-acceptance. We want to do all we can to succeed, to help, to contribute. But we also want to accept our limitations, acknowledge our shortcomings, admit that most of us will not rise to stardom in our quest to lead meaningful lives and heal the world, and still feel the love and pride of which we know we are worthy.

We are generous *and* selfish, humble *and* vain, gentle *and* rough, committed *and* indifferent, wise *and* foolish. We must stop trying to fight the friction, forcing one side to overwhelm the other, and learn instead to live with both, and hold all of our contradictions in a single, unifying embrace.

“When we resolve these two tensions -- love versus power and demand versus acceptance – we are ready to be proper givers and receivers of the divine energy that continues to coarce through us”, concludes Rabbi Green.”

When we, in our inner lives, move beyond the either/or binaries that divide us not only from others but from ourselves, from the divine soul that animates each of us, to a place of both/and, of wholeness, then we will bring healing not only to our own lives, but to Life itself.

For being true to our own soul, teach the mystics, is the unique contribution we each make to the universe. This is the Avodah, the devotion of which the Mishnah truly speaks.

The transformation of our minds through Torah and our hearts through Avodah leads to the Mishnah's third pillar, that of Gemilut Chassadim/acts of lovingkindness. How we treat others, the way we behave socially, our involvement in the great causes of our time, form the landscape on which all our healing and wholeness in the other two realms assume shape and texture to become manifest in the practical realities of human life.

On this day of Yom Kippur, remember that, according to Kabbalistic thought, the whole point of human existence is to transform evil and sin by restoring the divine sparks within our souls and within creation to the divine Source of all through acts of tikkun, of repair – ethical, spiritual, intellectual and emotional.

Living in the outer world with the sense of connectedness we strive to cultivate in our inner world is the third and final step in restoring the Many to the One, in weaving the diverse threads of life into a singular divine tapestry.

What made Rabbi Lebeau the greatest rabbi in the world to that man on that Shabbat long ago is the key to our own greatness, today and everyday: the ability to harness all of our disparate energies in order to be fully present to one another, to reach across the emotional, cultural and religious gulfs that tear us apart and hold and behold the singular essence that breathes within us all.

Accomplish this and we may not live forever, but we will have brought the spring and the heart one step closer to one another, eyes locked eternally in a gaze of love.