

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – B'ha-alotekha

I recently read a Khasidic commentary that addressed "down time." The author argued that we commonly experience two types of time. We experience "real time," when we work our jobs, perform our tasks, and complete our daily agenda. "Time in between time" are the moments we spend waiting or moving between "real time" tasks. He further noted how we divide the time in between into two categories. He noted that there are planned moments of transition and there are the moments that occur when we find ourselves too early, too late (and having to wait longer) or just stuck somewhere because of the circumstances around us. The Lubavitcher Rebbe disagreed with this statement, He argued that there is only one type of time, but that there are many types of experiences, and each is an opportunity to infuse one's life with God. This argument caught my eye, for while I agree with it, the commentary only affirmed that these are indeed opportunities to infuse God into our lives but did nothing to expand upon how we are to take advantage of with these opportunities. My father zt"l used to say, to talk about one's opportunity or potential meant only that nothing important had yet been accomplished. We have to look beyond finding opportunity to making use of it.

My quandary roots in the difficult struggle it takes to welcome God in to one's life. The struggle begins with trying to figure out what God is, (then, at least the process has direction). The greatest conundrum of the contemporary religious world is the idea that there is a right way (and hence lots of wrong ways) to, "let God in."

This week's Torah portion describes the process of our Biblical ancestor's journey through the wilderness. When encamped, God's spirit dwelt in the tent of meeting. But, there were the periods of time when God was not in the tent. When the people were in transit, God was lighting the way as a pillar of fire. These times are the sage's "times in between time." The Rebbe argued that it is in these moments of transition that one is challenged to find God. With all candor, I feel that the Rebbe heads in the right direction, but does not go far enough.

Too many of us grow up believing that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to people who are not good (or at best, not behaving well). Certainly in moments of success, it is easy to see God smiling on us. When trauma happens in our world, a regular default answer starts with, "What did I do to deserve this?" Or, as is too often the case, too many will look at another's misfortune and believe that they deserve what they get because God is punishing them. Now, whether these moments are "real" or "time between," really does not matter. For one who suffers, it is all real time. There are no moments in between: moments of transition or waiting. Every moment and every movement are real and therefore in real time and at those times, God's compassion seems very distant.

Yet, I know many who live afflicted with horrible limitations who thrive on each moment, and for whom God's presence is very real and very much a blessing. Whether the disability be physical or emotional, political or societal, stories abound of people who, even when faced with horrible adversity, find faith. This is where I find value in the biblical stories of the wilderness journey. Imagine the fear of the unknown that must accompany the continual uproot and journey as told in this story. We are not described as nomads. We are a people -- a nation even. Nations don't uproot and move, en masse, every month. There is no stability. Each day in one place establishes roots and security. The stories of war do not begin with our encampments, but with our journeys. So as long as we were in one place, all could see God's presence in the order of the community. During the time of journey and transition, the elderly and infirm were at the back of the ranks; "easy picking" for marauders. In fact, the Amalekites are our sworn Biblical enemy forever because, that is how they fought. They attacked the weak at the rear, first.

For so many, there are no transitions and every day finds them at the back of the ranks; easy pickings for marauders. And yet, so many people who live this life find faith. Certainly we know people who weather their entire life enduring illnesses with love and faith. Our own lore is replete with stories of people who overcome oppression and exile, because of their faith. Faith is not found in the medals we win or the accolades we are given. Faith is not rooted in success or failure. Faith in divinity finds its way into our lives when we can see blessings even amidst the moments where we find ourselves uprooted and in transition. And for far too many this challenge is not a matter of transition, rather, it is a lifetime way of existence. Whatever God is, God **is not** -- there for some and not there for others, nor is God there some of the time and not at others. In this sense, the Rebbe was correct, but I have to believe that it is not just at moments of transition that we must struggle to find blessings. Certainly they are not withheld but sometimes we just don't look hard enough. Whatever our pain or limitations, let's be more intentional in finding ... even in our limitations, a path toward blessings (and God). Shabbat Shalom.