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Behind the Curtain: Opening to Mystery

L'shanah tovah and g'mar chatimah tovah.

This past spring, I received a call from a teacher of a local Boston public middle school. He was teaching his students a unit on diversity. They were moving towards the end of their unit, and finishing now with a flourish: three visits in three days to a mosque, church and synagogue.

The teacher had been here at Reyim once before for a simcha, a celebration of a friend, he remembered the warmth of the community, and decided to reach out. I was delighted to invite them to Reyim. I love these kinds of events, knowing of course, that whatever I could say to help the students deepen their questions of personal identity would pale in comparison to what I would learn from them. The deepest wells of insight live in the questions of kids strong, innocent and irreverent enough to just say what's on their minds.

From my study, I saw the bus come in, and I went to meet them outside. The bus came to a stop. The door opened and dozens of kids sprung down the steps as if shot by a cannon from the back. The teacher gave me a weak, awkward smile.

Oh boy.

I greeted them by the door. As they came in, they were talking with each other, singing, and dancing.

We walked down the hallway, they're still talking, singing, dancing. We paused just before the Sanctuary.

I opened the door and turned on the lights.

The kids walked in. Their first time in a synagogue.

Silence. They walked single file to the front, and sat down facing the ark. I stood on the floor, facing them, with the ark behind me, as I am now.

My task was to teach the class about Judaism. I had one hour.

I wanted to take advantage of the fact that they had never been here before. I began by modeling the essential, ancient Jewish practice: Asking questions.

“Take a moment to look around you. Notice everything,” I said. “What questions do you have?”

They sat quietly. I love seeing how long we can sit in complete quiet. There’s a fragile balance between the graceful meditation and awkward angst of silence.

After a minute a small group began to huddle and whisper to each other.

One of the kids, apparently speaking for the group, warily raised his hand.

“Yes.”

“What’s behind the curtain?” he asked.

He was referring, of course, to the ark.

What an amazing question. That is the essence of it all, isn’t it? The entire Jewish spiritual tradition in a single question. Curious, anxious, courageous, and unwaveringly open to possibility, and mystery. What is behind the curtain?

Still modeling, this time Judaism as a dialectic tradition, investigating truth through discussion, I threw the question right back. “What do you think?”

Silence.

The small groups gathered again. Hushed conversation.

A student raised his hand. The other looked on, anticipating his response.

“Yes.”

“A body?”

I was thrown for a moment, until I quickly realized it was a sincere guess, shared by others.

I reassured them that wasn’t the case.

The guesses continued.

Pictures of rabbis? No.

Jewels? Well, yes, there are silver crowns, though they are more the accoutrement than the featured items.

Books? So close.

More guesses, until a very slight boy with wiry glasses and hair hanging over his eyes who had been nodding off until now, jumped up and yelled, “I know, I know!”

“Yes?”

“The Torah!”

The teacher gave me a wink.

I told him he was right. And not only one Torah scroll. Many.

The kids rose and ran over to the boy to give him high fives and patented handshakes as if he had scored the winning run.

I loved every bit of this whole scene. We spent the hour talking about the meaning of Torah and how it guides our lives in its complicated and hard-hitting stories. I did my best to respond to their rapid-fire questions, until they grew tired, and returned to their bus back to school.

Since then, every time I enter the Sanctuary, I think about this conversation. It has changed the way I walk in. I try to come in now as if I have never been here before, curious, apprehensive, and open-hearted to the mystery that dwells in and around this holy space. What is held so closely, lovingly, by this magnificent, mysterious ark?

This question is not merely an exercise of the imagination; it is also the heart of theological inquiry. This is how we discover the Sacred.

Here's what we know: The ark called an Aron in Hebrew, holds sifrei Torah, Torah scrolls. These scrolls are made from animal hide, and contain words, over 300,000 of them, which are written, black on white, in a unique calligraphy, with precise spacing. All this we know.

But the ark also has a mystical history. The ancient holy ark, called the Aron Ha'kodesh, was a gold-covered wooden chest designed and built according to a highly detailed and specific pattern given by God to Moses when the Israelites were encamped at the foot of Mt Sinai. Stored inside were two stone tablets, engraved with the Ten Commandments. The Ark was carried by the Levite priests

ahead of the people through the desert towards the Land of Israel, hidden under a large veil, concealed even from the eyes of the priests who carried it.

At the cusp of the Land of Israel, the Israelites had to cross the Jordan River. When they reached the river, they stopped in their tracks, anxious, wary, despairing. Like their ancestors, who stood at the foot of Sea of Reeds, requiring the Sea to part in order to march forward, the Israelites now stood by the powerful Jordan River. The priests carrying the Ark began walking in. As soon as their feet touched the waters, the river grew dry, and remained dry until the people had passed over. In a ritual marking a spectacular, intensive religious event, twelve stones were taken from the Jordan River and placed precisely where the priests had stood with the ark.

The Ark, with the Ten Commandments held firmly inside, was the locus of God's presence on earth. The ancient Israelites could feel this. They knew its holy qualities.

And - as they traveled through the desert, the ancient Israelites did not carry just one ark. The Hebrew word for ark, aron, also means coffin. Fulfilling this double meaning, the Israelites carried a second ark. Inside this second ark were the bones of Joseph - Joseph of the multi-colored dream coat, the beloved youngest son of Jacob and Rachel, who became a powerful figure in Egypt, ultimately reuniting with his brothers and father Jacob there. With this second ark on their backs, the memory of Joseph remained entrenched in the minds, hearts, and imagination of this people.

Two arks.

One built according to God's instruction, carrying tablets inscribed with God's words - a dwelling place for God's presence;
the second carrying the bones of Joseph.

All these generations later, these remain our two greatest sources of Jewish spiritual life:

one: standing graciously, humbly, in the presence of God, and
two: carrying the memories of those whom we have loved and lost, and would do anything to bring back.

Entering this Sanctuary this way, wondering what the ark holds for us, we can feel the sense of mystery that dwells here, pulsating underneath the structure of the space.

I know this is hard. We tend to be more rationally-minded and intellectually driven. But during Yom Kippur, we are explicitly asked to re-engage those parts of our hearts and minds that are open to mystery, to let go of our insistence on knowing, and instead dwell in the possibilities that surround us; not to stand tall and powerful in what we know, but rather humbly and gratefully in what we don't.

Opening to mystery offers us a different kind of truth; not scientific or mathematical, not social or political, but rather a truth of faith: what moves our world forward is our ability - the human capacity - to open our hearts wide enough that God's sacred qualities can flow through us: mercy, passion, compassion, patience, kindness, and forgiveness. We call out these qualities again and again during Yom Kippur. Calling them out feels particularly necessary right now as both a respite and cultural counterpoint to the absurd, forceful and exhausting social and political tides that are dominating our lives.

When we re-engage this part of ourselves, open to mystery, we can more deeply experience the stillness and joy of our lives.

I was reminded of this insight just a few weeks ago.

I had the great blessing of being a member of a beit din, a rabbinic court, overseeing the conversion of a man from Haiti. He had been living here in the U.S., raised his family here, and was part of a local synagogue already for many years. English was his third language. He was jarringly gentle, with a very quiet voice and a very thick accent. I had to lean very closely in to both hear and understand him.

We asked him to share how he got here. What was his path? This is always my favorite part of conversion rituals: hearing the stories of those who come to Jewish identity and life with such deep

openness and passion. What we're asking, of course, is to tell us what dwells inside their personal ark.

I knew we were going to get along well when he began with his grandfather.

"My grandfather was Jewish," he said, and started to tell us stories.

The first stories he shared were sweet. He described memories of playing as a child, even rescuing his grandfather from a snake by helping him climb up a tree.

One of the rabbis asked him: "What is something your grandfather taught you that influenced you, maybe even helped you decide to become Jewish?"

He sat back, quiet for what seemed like forever.

He was unsure what he wanted to share.

Sensing this, we encouraged him to be honest.

"He taught me to go to the mountain," he said.

Now we were quiet, for what I'm sure felt to him like forever, until I couldn't take it any longer.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Go to the mountain. That's where God is. That's where God calls us from. Listen closely. *You can hear the breath of God.*"

I was totally mesmerized.

For the rest of the hour we talked about Shabbat, Torah learning, Kashrut, preparing for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and his family. He was a true neshama, a beautiful old soul with a bright, engaging mind and gentle loving heart.

Throughout the morning, I couldn't stop thinking: what did he mean? Was it a metaphor?

Is the mountain prayer? Meditation? rest? friendship? Where did he discover this feeling of wholeness and holiness and purpose? Where did he hear God's breath?

After his immersion in the mikveh, the pool of water for conversion, I sat with him again.

"What do you mean, go to the mountain?" I asked.

"Rabbi," he said.

"Yes."

"Go to the mountain. You know, Mt. Washington. The Adirondacks. It's beautiful there."

Ohhhh....the mountain.

We know this story. The mountain. That's where God is. *Vayikra elav Adonai min ha'bar*. God called Moses from the mountain, to climb, to stand *panim el panim*, face to face with God and receive Torah. As morning dawned, there was thunder and lightning and a dense cloud upon the mountain and a kol shofar - a very loud blast of the shofar - and all the people in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp towards God and they took their places "*ba'tachtit hahar*" at the foot of the mountain. There they received the stones inscribed with the sacred text that would be placed in the Aron, the holy ark, and carried, and carried and carried.

The entire Jewish spiritual tradition comes from that experience on the mountain. Even the words of our greatest prophet Isaiah come from the mountaintop. Overlooking the Promised Land, he calls out to the people, "Adonai's presence will be revealed. Together we will see the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Go the mountain. You can hear the breath of God there.

Of course this image of going to the mountain has inspired artists, activists and poets throughout time, including one of my favorite poems entitled: Someday a mountain

(poetryinnature.com/poem/someday-a-mountain/)

I'm going to be a mountain someday

and just stand all the time

stalwart and mighty

collecting crystals from heaven

and dispersing them ever so gently

kindly and impartially

to thirsty fields below

i will rise

to alpine stature

i will be a mountain
firm and ever a humble beacon
a lofty rising peak
that calls to the brave and strong
urging all yearnings
to look up
to arise
and stop determined storms
and be a rocky sanctuary
more than a point of reference
above the din of banality
and hostile indifference
loving in the purity
of nearness to God
crowned in white that holds all color
fed by the groanings of the earth
standing, always standing
yes, i'm going to be a mountain
someday
for this
i rise up

The poet echoes the psalm we sing morning and night throughout this season of repentance: “one thing I ask of Adonai - for this I yearn. To dwell in the house of Adonai all the days of my life. *Lachazot b’noam Adonai, u’livaker b’beychalo.* To behold God’s beauty, to visit God’s Sanctuary.”

Like the composer of the psalm and the poet, the exceedingly gentle man I had the blessing of meeting for just one afternoon already knew this insight of Jewish faith. ***Look around, see greatness, and experience the staggering truth that you’re alive. Live with wonder. Stay open to the mystery that pulsates within the living structures of our earth.***

As we have done the past few years, tomorrow evening, during the Neilah service, as we approach the end of Yom Kippur, I will invite you to climb; to join us on the bima and stand for a moment of meditation before the aron, our holy ark. As you come, prepare yourself, as if you've never been here before. Start from the very beginning. Ask: what's held so lovingly in this ark?

Listen closely. God is all around and you are together with all those whose lives have touched yours. We are their loving companions, their shepherds. Their *neshamot* are hovering, protecting, comforting and loving. ***And if we're open to it, we can hear the sound of breath as we climb the winding switchbacks of the mountain.***

l'shanah tovah and gmar chatimah tovah.

May you be blessed,
may you be loved,
may you be sealed in the book of life.