

Holding-Gods-Perspective_Naso_May17-2013_raw

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So of course you know that my three and a half year old, three and three quarters as he would like to say, out of nowhere comes over to me and my wife and he says, Abba, is that a gun? Looking at the, it wasn't a gun, it was a piece of wood maybe. And the words are leaving my mouth, bear where did you, where else? Everywhere we look, we can see how much violence has pervaded our everyday lives. We don't have to go far.

It's rooted in a divided life, in a fault line that is within us that cracks open and becomes a dividing line between us. It's everywhere, not just inside me, not inside you. It's as much a staple of our lives as anything that we can imagine.

In fact, it is so pervasive that so much of violence is written off by us as, well, that's just normal. It's normal to walk down the street and to see video games with guns ablazing. It's normal to watch commercials and see violence everywhere we look.

But there's an even more insidious, deeper violence. There's a violence that is done to children when parents insult them, when teachers demean their own students, when supervisors treat employees as disposable means to an economic end, when people condemn gays and lesbians in the name of God, or when racists live by the belief that people with a different skin color are less than human. And just as physical violence may lead to physical death, spiritual violence causes death in other ways, death of a sense of self, of trust in others, of risk-taking on behalf of creativity, of commitment to the common good.

If obituaries were written for deaths of this kind, there wouldn't be enough paper and ink to record them. So the bad news tonight is that violence is pervasive. The good news is we can do something about it.

Namely, each and every one of us, each and every one of you, we all, can choose to act nonviolently. We can choose to think nonviolently. We can choose to speak nonviolently.

And nonviolence, as Parker Palmer suggests, in all of its forms has one habit of the heart, one habit. And that habit is this, to be in the world nonviolently, says Parker Palmer, means learning to hold the tension of opposites, trusting that the tension itself will pull our hearts and minds open to a third way, he calls it, a third way. A third way of thinking and a third way of acting.

More specifically, we must learn to hold the tension between the reality of the moment together with the possibility that something better might emerge. That's the greatest tension. Holding the reality of the moment against the possibility of what might yet emerge.

That is, if you will, the yoga of nonviolence. The posture of the nonviolent heart and mind is to hold that tension and to stand in that breach. Parker Palmer, one more time, says, the insight at

the heart of nonviolence is that we live in a tragic gap, a gap between the way things are and the way we know they might be.

Or as my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Zalman, likes to say, the difference between is and ought. Now, I harbor no illusions about the difficulty of the task at hand. It isn't easy to stand in that gap.

It isn't easy to bear witness to the power of presence, to not choose between one or the other tension, but to hold that space in between. Let's ask ourselves for a moment here, what is it that makes living in that way difficult? What is it that has us scratching the itch in either direction? I think if we were to take a moment and do some self-reflection, some introspection, we would see that at the heart of all of those moments in our lives, when we are faced with these tensions and we instinctively reach for one instead of the other, losing that balance, what motivates us is fear. At its core, we're afraid.

No? Yes? I don't know. I'm afraid. And I know that in my life, when I make that shift, when I don't hold the space between, I'm afraid.

I'm afraid that this thing called my heart, this fist of stone will break. And if it breaks, oi va voi. We have images of a broken heart as fragmented into pieces all around.

A broken heart is what girlfriends and boyfriends and lovers, all kinds of broken-hearted associations. But what if for one moment we would imagine that the broken heart is that heart that is now broken open to a new possibility? That there was no space in the heart until it broke. And now that it has broken, there are places in the heart that did not exist until it broke.

If we were to imagine it that way, then we would yearn to be straddling the tensions in our life. We'd be hoping against all hope that somehow in this studio apartment of a heart, a three-bedroom might arise. Even in New York City.

If we imagined that a broken heart is not broken and therefore not functioning, but now peeled away from its unhealthy, unnatural way of defending itself, and that holding tensions is your birthright, it might shift us towards the third way. In this week's reading, this portion, the parashat HaShavua, the portion of the week, parashat Naso, we have an odd grouping of stories found in chapter five of the book of Numbers. They appear in this order.

The story of the sotah, the adulterous woman, followed by the story of the nazir, the Nazarite, who abstains and becomes an ascetic, abstains from wine, amongst other things. And then, oddly, the priestly blessing that I'm sure many of you here are familiar with, the priestly blessing. May God bless you and watch over you.

May God shine God's face upon you and charm you, grace you. May God lift up God's face to you and give you peace, shalom. One of the commentators says that this progression is as follows.

There is a world of the ideal in the world of relationships, and the sotah, the story of the adulterous woman, is a story writ large of a divided life, a relationship gone awry. Vows that had been given and taken have now gone by the wayside. There is, instead of trust, suspicion.

Instead of love, there is fear. Instead of connection, there is alienation. And the story immediately following it is a story of someone who wants to abstain from the world as if the world were dangerous.

Another divided life, dividing the world between the sacred and the profane, between the holy and the not holy, between wine and not wine. The nazir leads a divided life, so much so that the rabbis say that he has to bring a sin offering for having become a Nazirite. And within those two stories, the priestly blessing arrives, says this commentator.

And it's apotheosis, its highest point is its third way, its third line. Yissa Adonai panav eylecha v'yaseym lecha shalom. May God, Yissa, lift up panav, his face, eylecha.

I would like to submit tonight a Hasidic interpretation that I thought of today. Neo, because it's new, meaning today. Yissa Adonai panav eylecha means, may God give you God's face.

May God give you God's perspective. Panav means perspective in Hebrew, not just face, but perspective. Yissa Adonai panav, may God give you God's face, God's perspective, and then what do you have? V'yaseym lecha shalom, you will have peace.

What's so great about peace? Peace isn't what we think it is, everyone. Peace isn't some conciliatory, bland parva margarine that we spread over differences. It isn't the erasure of conflict.

It isn't their harmonization. Shalom, say the rabbis, as in the sentence, o sesh shalom bim ramav, may the one who makes peace bim ramav in his heavens, huya sesh shalom malina vel ko yisrael, may that one make peace for us. Say the rabbis, just as heaven is made of fire and ice, fire and water, rather, God knows how to bring together opposites and hold them together in a tension that is called heaven, may you also have shalom mind, able to hold your right and your left, your up and your down, your inside and your outside.

May you hold that, as Rav Kook wrote, yesh omnam olam elyon biroma shol machshaba, shasham kvar ha-shalom mushkaf. He says, there is a world above all of our thoughts and all of our decisions. The word decision itself means to kill an option, to cut something, dcday, to kill.

Above our decisions, as holy as they are, there is a room, he calls it a room, it's a room, it's an elevated status called shalom. It's a place, it's on the roof of your three-bedroom heart. It's what Rumi spoke of when Rumi says, out beyond ideas of right and wrong, there's a field and I will meet you there.

That field's name is shalom field. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk

about ideas and language, even the phrase each other doesn't make any sense in that field. Shalom mind is not apathy, it isn't cynicism, it isn't who could care less mind, I don't need to make a decision.

It isn't indifference and it isn't undiagnosed ADHD. It is the space the Torah describes between the cherubs where Moses hears God's voice. I'm still buzzing from last week's article in the Jewish Week.

I'm still buzzing from how this community was perceived by someone who came for one snapshot of a Friday night. This isn't for all of you who are here for a snapshot. Something he said caught me off guard, but not because of his comments or their accuracy, but rather because I have the terrible feeling that I'm sure many of us have had before, that feeling of being misunderstood because someone just saw a snippet of your life.

I remember a very banal example as a young man reading a book about the great Russian goaltender Vladislav Tretiak who surprised the Canadian hockey team in 1972 in the Summit Series. They didn't know that he was one of the greatest goaltenders to live because they had a scouting report. They came to see him play a game the night before his wedding.

And in that game, he gave up eight goals. He had the last laugh because they didn't know how great he was, but they took a piece for the whole and they missed him. I had that feeling of being missed when the author of the article about our community said that our community is a feel-good place, that it is individualistic, and that it is about me versus us.

So let me say to him and to all of you here, it isn't an accurate portrayal of our community, but it's a useful caricature. It gives me an opportunity to explicitly define the community that I envisioned and that we are building here together at Romamu in places like Romamu. The community that I envisioned and want to be a leader in is a community that is both and.

It is a community where it is safe to be tense. Ironic, right? Tension in a community that is held nonviolently with shalom, heart, and mind. The tension between the individual and the community, the tension between the past and the future, the tension between the particularistic and the universal, the tension between Hebrew and English.

A community like that is a community that I want to belong to. A community that holds those tensions with Shlemut and dances that dance. Open, closed, open, closed, open, closed.

It is in that oscillation that the sacred voice of God is heard. Our community must hold all of those things because the Torah that we received on Shavuot this past Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday is the Torah of Shalom. The Jerusalem Talmud says, HaTorah Hazu Domeh Le'Shnei Shevilim Echad Shel Or V'Echad Shel Sheleg.

This Torah that we have behind us here and in every heart and every seat in this room and in

every shul, wherever people are praying for peace. Each and every Torah is made up of the path of fire and the path of ice, says the Jerusalem Talmud. HaTorah Hazu Domeh Le'Shnei Shevilim Echad Shel Or V'Echad Shel Sheleg.

If you lean too far to the fire, you will be burned by the fire. HaTorah Hazu Domeh Le'Shnei Sheleg. If you lean this way, you'll be frozen by the ice.

Ma Yaaseh, what should you do, says the Talmud. YaHalech BaEmtzah. We are to walk in the middle, holding the right and the left, holding the space that unites and transcends the inevitable polarities and binaries our culture of violence projects onto us.

The soul has many contradictions. You are, all of you, containing multitudes. That's okay.

We must work towards a peace that includes tensions. We must work to build a community that includes all of the opposites and that which transcends them. We must work to soften ourselves, to open our hearts to the inevitable heartbreak that births new Torah, new visions, new insights.

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