

Worship and Study Harvard Hillel YOM KIPPUR. SEPT. 18, 2010

I want to talk about *teshuva*. As we all know, the word that connotes repentance in Hebrew literally means *return*. I've long been fascinated by the notion of return to some pristine state—'renew our days as of old' [קדש ימינו כקדם] and wondered what the collective voice is pointing to when it invokes something called קדם. This is of course not limited to the High Holiday liturgy. In one of the seven wedding blessings recited under the חופה, we allude to the primordial harmony of lovers fresh with the joy of their Divine manufacture in the Garden of Eden from 'Kedem':

שִׁמְחָה תִּשְׂמַח רַעִים אֱהוּבִים כְּשִׁמְחָה יִצְרַף בְּגֵן עֵדֶן מִקְדָּם

Is קדם, then, a **place**—the eastmost point, the cradle of our existence, what we once would have referred to unselfconsciously as The Orient, our ultimate point of **orientation**—or is it a **time**, the very first moment of time? In any case, as a time/place or *chronotope*, it is a reference to the very beginning, that edenic millisecond in our mythical consciousness before the temptation and the deception and the discord and the punishment... What does it mean to invoke that brief glimmer of utter innocence as the time/place to which we, weary with life and history, desire to return? And the corollary to that question is: what is the *difference*, if any, between personal and collective *teshuva*, between the idea of return as a personal point of reference and as a collective object of desire, the eschatology of return to the point of origin?

I want to present opposing arguments, for and against קדם as the *telos* of individual and collective consciousness. The argument *for* Eden or קדם as point of both origin and destination, which I will call the **comic** argument, goes something like this: since you have to start

somewhere, if you begin with the presumption of innocence, you are more likely to build a benign trajectory. The Jewish story has two alternative points of origin: the Garden of Eden and the *expulsion* from the Garden of Eden. If we move forward in history, we can continue those two narrative lines, focusing on the Temple or on the *destruction* of the Temple. You see where I'm going here. In constructing the comic version, I'm embracing Salo Baron's resistance to the predominantly 'lachrymose' version of Jewish history. For a contemporary reference, look to Amos Elon's history of German Jewry, *The Pity of it All*, which opens with Moses Mendelssohn's fortuitous appearance in Berlin in 1743, as the moment that heralds the *Haskalah* and suggests that things might have turned out differently.... Or consider the memoirs, autobiographies, and even the fiction, of such Holocaust survivors as Saul Friedlander, Primo Levi, Jurek Becker or Ilona Karmel; each of these writers posits a moment of innocence untainted by the disaster to come, which allows the survivor to emerge into the aftermath of the war with a safe, protected point of ultimate reference—however fleeting it may have been. Those writers like Aharon Appelfeld who do not have such a point of reference, live—and condemn their characters to live—forever under the sign of the Swastika. Richard Coe, in his study of the genre of autobiography, *When the Grass was Taller*, describes childhood's paradise lost as a closed or sheltered world, an “alternative dimension” that becomes particularly compelling when something in the present intensifies the normal sense of loss and nostalgia.<sup>i</sup> Loss and nostalgia belong to territory once held, a family once intact, time once experienced as open-ended. It would seem that only the presumption of a protected, pre-traumatic past, of whatever duration, furnishes a base from which a sanguine future can be built.

Even in געײלע, as the gates are closing and most of our focus is on God's mercy in light of our incorrigibly sinful state, as we acknowledge those stubborn stains that even a whole day of

fasting, breast-beating, genuflecting and praying has not succeeded in bleaching out, we recall our beginnings and invoke Divine mercy in the form of Divine recall. The *piyyut* אל נורא עלילה [lit: God the awesome plotter], attributed to the medieval poet Moshe ibn Ezra, contains the following verses:

זכור צדקת אביהם. וחדש את ימיהם, כקדם ותחילה. בשעת הנעילה

Remember our ancestors' righteousness / and renew our days as of old, and as at the beginning, / in this closing hour [*Mahzor Lev Shalem*, p. 407].

Yet the same nostalgia and appeal for total recall is invoked, in almost the same words but with very different resonances, when the point of origin is the *destruction* of the Temple or the *expulsion* from Eden:

השיבינו ה' אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם

'Turn us toward You, O God, and we will return to You; renew our days as of old.' This *pasuk*, which we recite every time we return the Torah scroll to the ark, and in the שמע קולנו prayer for Yom Kippur, is taken from the end of the book of Lamentations [5:21]; it may very well have been a later appendage to the original text, but in any case it is a response to the *hurban*: it is the apocalyptic yearning that is meant to cap the lachrymose, tragic version of the Jewish story. Echoes of this phrase are also to be found in Gen. 3, after the expulsion, where a slight change of wording turns גן עדן מקדם into מקדם לגן עדן or East of Eden, suggesting the place of exile as the very inverse of the Garden.<sup>ii</sup>

So we see that even a subtle shift in phrasing or in shading is enough to reverse meaning. Indeed, the connection between memory and return in the wake of destruction is often anything

but benign. The ultimate psalm of memory is number 137 [קל"ז], presumably recited originally by the exiles from Jerusalem 'by the waters of Babylon'; one of its verses is intoned by every *hatan* before he breaks the glass:

אם אשכחך ירושלים תשכח ימיני...

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget....

The sentiment appears sweetly nostalgic, but its import, if we read on, is vengeful. The psalm ends with another pledge to memory, this one insisting on total recall that involves an ultimate settling of accounts, a final reckoning that the people has yearned for in all the days of its exile: "Remember O Lord on the Day of Jerusalem the children of Edom who said 'Raze it, raze it to its very foundations.' O daughter of Babylon...Happy is he who will repay you for what you have done to us. Happy is he who shall seize and dash your little ones against the rock."

So what does it mean to plot the future in terms of the past? Or the destination in terms of the point of origin? What kinds of memory are being invoked in the comic and in the tragic versions of Jewish history? Merciful memory or vengeful memory? Granted, the argument I am mounting *against* 277 as point of reference is primarily against the lachrymose, vengeful version of return. But even the presumably benign, 'comic' yearning to go back to some innocent place is problematic, especially when it enters the political, historical realm. That place we call 277, for example, may now be populated by others who came after we left.... The last two centuries have taught us how romantic impulses to return to the land, to some pristine version of the self, untainted by impure others or forms of otherness, feeds into fascist rhetoric and behavior. In her wonderful exploration of the *Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym reminds us that in the 17<sup>th</sup>

century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, alongside the open-ended vista of progress we call *the modern*, there grew that reflexive –or retro-flexive— impulse that feeds nostalgia. Boym critiques “‘nostalgia as history without guilt,’...an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure.”<sup>iii</sup>

So is there another form of return that is more sanguine? Consider with me another psalm, one that both the High Holiday and the daily liturgy have mined for phrases on *teshuva*. Psalm 51 includes such familiar pesukim as:

"אל תשליכני מלפניך ורוח קדשך אל תקח ממני [13]; ה' שפתי תפתח ופי יגיד תהילתך [17]"

Cast me not away from Your presence and take not Your holy spirit from me; O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will rehearse your praise.

I want to suggest that in this text, which the 14<sup>th</sup> century theologian John Wycliffe called the most profound of the penitential psalms, there are a few moves that could help us to construct a more complex idea of return than either the naïve-comic or the vengeful-lachrymose vision of קדם.

Ps. 51 not only reflects David's usual role as King and as presumed composer of psalms to be sung by the Levites in the Temple, but represents him primarily as a sinful individual. It is one of only a handful of psalms that belong to a personal, 'autobiographical' or historical discourse. The Psalm begins by setting the scene as just after the prophet Nathan has come to David, uncovering his heinous sin of impregnating Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, David's faithful soldier, and then sending Uriah out to be killed so he can claim Bathsheba as his wife. The mise-scène in the biblical text is very laconic: "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came

to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” The assumption is that the reader will be familiar enough with the story to fill in the blanks. But this is not the only surprise in this text. In David’s very passionate appeal for God’s forgiveness, there is a curious allusion to something that comes close to what will later be identified with the Christian concept of original sin:

הָן בַּעוֹן חוֹלַלְתִּי וּבַחַטָּא יִקְמָתְנִי אָמִי...

7 Look, in transgression was I conceived,

and in offense my mother spawned me.

That is Robert Alter’s translation. The words חוֹלַלְתִּי and יִקְמָתְנִי are hard to render into English, but connote an animalistic passion and struggle that have, as you can imagine, given rise to a whole library of exegesis. The one I find most convincing understands not the act of conception, or the sex act itself, as sinful; rather, the allusion is to the human condition as inevitably prone to sin. One is born into, or *writhed into*, as the Hebrew suggests, a state of transgression. Sort of like the Freudian assumption that the very act of birth involves trauma. There are, in the course of this Psalm, three different words for sin: עוֹן, חַטָּא, פֶּשַׁע, which can be loosely translated, in ascending order, as sin, transgression and iniquity.<sup>iv</sup> What is interesting for us in terms of the idea of *teshuva*, is that David does *not* invoke some sinless prelapsarian state to which he would advert in the act of repentance.

Another striking dimension of this psalm comes toward the end, in a sudden and surprising reference to sacrifice—“For You desire not sacrifice....You delight not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart”:

[18-19] זָבַחַי אֱלֹקִים רוּחַ נִשְׁבְּרָה לֵב נִשְׁבַּר וְנִדְכָּה

We are used to seeing such references in the prophetic and in later Hassidic texts but here, as attributed to David, whose son would build the Temple and establish the central cult of sacrifice, it seems to reflect a far more evolved, mediated and psychological approach to sin and atonement. This is, however, followed by: “O God...do good in thy favor to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem [היטיבה ברצונך את ציון תבנה חומות ירושלים][20]”...and a clear appeal for the reinstatement of animal sacrifice. The reference here seems intrusive enough to invite speculation that it is a later interpolation, not only because of the anachronism, but also because of the insertion of the collective dimension into such a personal prayer.

I want to suggest that whatever the textual problems created by the complex process of composition and redaction, the impact of these juxtapositions underscores an inherent tension between individual and collective forms of repentance and return. The reader is left with a ragged text in which the contradictions—and the choices—seem mutually exclusive but remain unresolved. Here we have in a most poignant form the significant difference between the one-time, linear fact of individual existence, and the presumed ‘eternity’ of the collective which allows for time to move backwards and forwards. The nostalgic imagination, Boym tells us, “refus[es] to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” [xv]. King David relinquishes, for a moment, his iconic status as he pushes against nostalgia in his own confession of human frailty and mortality.

So allow me, by way of conclusion, to move from David’s confession to my own, and to show how individual and collective recall can interact with and inform each other in our time.

I was lucky enough to have migrated to Israel before the Six Day War, when the State and I were both relatively young: she was fourteen and I was nineteen. Though Holy Jerusalem

was very old, she was out of sight, and the “new” city to which I came was youthful. Most importantly, she was slim. After 1967, in the words of Jerusalem’s poet Yehuda Amichai, the “noisy old dowager, all of her,/ with her gold and copper and stones,/ ...[came] back/ to a fat legal life.” But like the poet, I too long for the “old longing,” and for the “beloved” on the other side of divided Jerusalem, the one “who was so quiet” [*Poems of Jerusalem*, p. 95].

The real problem may be that, if I may say so, I have grown a bit wiser as I’ve aged—and she hasn’t. That fat old dowager lives not only with an insatiable appetite, but remains in the grip of childish memories that spawn utopian blueprints and literalized metaphors. We had learned, in the long years of our exile, what David articulated in his grief: “For You desire not sacrifice.... You delight not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.” We had learned to substitute not only the synagogue for the Temple, prayer for sacrifice, a broken heart for a slaughtered lamb, but a rich culture of the here and now for the pledge to tie up all the loose ends of collective memory. We had learned to inject the present time and place between the memory of Paradise Lost and the messianic desire for Paradise Regained. Like the ram substituted for Isaac in Gen. 22, we learned about the value of substitution and mediation. And yet, after 1967 it often seems that we have forgotten everything we learned—and that the Hebrew imagination has returned to iron-age impulses based on the vengeful pledge to total recall spelled out in Psalm 137-- “O daughter of Babylon, happy is he who will repay you for what you have done to us...”

I want to suggest that this may be a way of cynically eschewing the wisdom of age in favor of nostalgia for our lost childhood. But there is another way. Listen again:

"כמיהה לירושלים, לילדות בירושלים, בזמן רחוק, אחר..."

This first line of one of Amichai's last poems, which is translated as:

“Longing for Jerusalem, for childhood in Jerusalem, in another faraway time”

--I would translate as: “Longing for Jerusalem, for childhood in Jerusalem, in another, **different**, time—or, more liberally, in another time, **but differently**.” Here is how the poem continues:

The children of the Levites longing, now that they are old, in exile  
by the waters of Babylon. They still remember singing  
in the Temple when their voices had just begun to change.  
at night they remind one another of their childhood:  
Remember how we played hide-and-seek behind  
the Holy of Holies, among the urns of frankincense,  
near those drainage ditches around the altar, in the shadow  
of the embroidered mantle of the holy Ark,  
between the cherubim? [*Open Closed Open*, p. 144; Hebrew, Vol. 5, p. 287]

Hide-and-seek behind the Holy of Holies??!! The games of our collective childhood give way in this poet's maturity to the playful metaphors that detoxify the dangers of a latter-day proximity to sacred space. But there are others, mainly politicians and biblical literalists, whose millennial longing has been exchanged for vengeful, exclusive return to the place of childhood *without either the games of childhood or the ironic distance of age*.<sup>v</sup> As the political conflict in the region has given way to religious war, the version of Judaism that has come to prevail is a literalized, shall we say childish? version of some of our constitutive stories and basic impulses.

Svetlana Boym recommends that we substitute “romantic nostalgia, [which] undermines any linear conception of progress,” with what she calls “reflective nostalgia, which resists “paranoic projections characteristic of nationalist nostalgia” and “recognizes the cultural memories” of others [pp. 13, 337]. She reminds us that for Kant, “philosophy was seen as a nostalgia for a better world” [p.13]. Writing within the same Aristotelian tradition, Maimonides,

at the end of his magisterial *Mishneh Torah*, envisions the *eschaton* as the time/place where Israel will be “free to devote itself to the law and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb it...with neither famine nor war,...jealousy nor strife... The sages and prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the gentiles...”<sup>vi</sup>

Messianic time is invoked here as a return to a place we have never really been, except in our most ethical imagination. Let me leave you then with the conviction that there is indeed another way to envision and to perform *teshuva*, embedded in the wisdom of our poets and philosophers, from the most ancient to the most contemporary. Our return in this mode can never be complete, and not only because such things are clearly impossible except in childish fantasies, but because it is not a naïve return to mythical or even historical beginnings. Rather it is a return mediated by the wisdom of our years and all the places we have sojourned along the way, by the acknowledgement that the human individual is prone to sinfulness and that, if there ever was a time of innocence, it was a fleeting point of departure meant to enable our journey. There is a form of *teshuva*, then, that is not total recall, of return that is not a ‘neat’ tying up of all the loose strands of our individual or collective memory, and that reaches for messianic days without exclusive, and vengeful, apocalyptic fantasies.

I wish us all a *Gmar hatima tova*.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven, 1984); quoted in Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “See Under: Memory: Reflections on *When Memory Comes*,” *History and Memory*, Special Festschrift in Honor of Saul Friedlander's Sixty-Fifth Birthday, Vol. 9, Nos. 1-2, Fall 1997, p. 368.

<sup>ii</sup> See also Ps. 85:5: ישענו ה' שובנו ה' ישענו; Isaiah 63:11: ...ימי עולם משה עמו...; Zecharia 2; Malakhi 3: וערבה לה' מנחת יהודה וירושלים כימי עולם וכשנים קדמוניות .

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<sup>iii</sup> Nostalgia as “essentially history without guilt” is a quote from Michael Kamen. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, N.Y.: Basic Books, 2001, p. xiv.

<sup>iv</sup> See the commentary of Barbara Ellison Rosenblitt:  
<http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/BR51.html>.

<sup>v</sup> As Ariel Hirschfeld writes, “the destruction of the Temple and the breaking of the tablets constitute historical and developmental truth with profound implications. The maturation and survival of the Jewish people, tragic as the circumstances may have been, . . . brought about a separation of meaning from place. The reconnection to place, to The Place, the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount, is the ultimate test of its maturity.”<sup>15</sup> עמ' 15 . אריאל הירשפלד, רשימות על מקום, My translation.

<sup>vi</sup> Quoted in Joel L. Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of the Civilization's Greatest Minds*, N.Y.: Doubleday, 2008, p. 356. Kraemer says he believes that Maimonides was influenced in his vision of the *eschaton* by a letter ascribed to Aristotle that was circulated among Jewish scholars in medieval Spain. Ibid.