

Filling the World (with Love)

D'var Torah for Shabbat *Vayak'hel-P'kudey Hachodesh* March 12, 2021

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

“Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Eternal’s *kavod* filled the Mishkan.” Exodus 40:34

When people hear that I serve a Reconstructionist congregation, they sometimes respond, “Oh yes, those are those very forward-thinking, creative, inclusive, democratic, egalitarian Jews who don’t believe in God.”

Forward-thinking, for sure. Creative in spades. Egalitarian and inclusive, indeed. Don’t believe in God? Ouch!

That’s okay, they say. I don’t believe in God, either.

I want to respond that they do believe in God, but that we rabbis have failed to convey to them what it is that spiritually awake people *mean* by the term “God.” And why it is that we rabbis go out of our way to find words other than the Teutonic derivation “God” to talk about the mystery at the heart of all existence. A mystery, by the way, that the agnostic having this conversation with me at least knows about, and sometimes feels rather close to.

One problem is that the Kaplanians (our Reconstructionist forebears) were trying to describe their abstract, non-anthropomorphic, non-supernatural concept of divinity by using the language of the era: 1930’s sociology-speak. One chapter of

one of those books and you come away intellectually stimulated but emotionally unmoved. Cold. Mindful but heartless.

I will argue that they were not talking about disbelief or non-belief, about atheism or agnosticism. They were employing dry modern language to talk about something their Chassidic forebears in the 19th century, and the Chassidic masters' Kabbalistic forebears in the 16th century, and the Kabbalists' Maimonidean forebears in the 12th century, and on and on back to tonight's mysterious parashah at the end of the book of Exodus, all knew to be the truth of truths.

It is all encapsulated in the spooky language of our portion: "Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Eternal's *kavod* filled the Mishkan."

I didn't translate *kavod* because it is a mysterious abstraction. Godly glory; honor; dignity; weightiness; seriousness. I didn't translate *mishkan* because it is a pun. It is not so much a "tabernacle" as it is a dwelling; an enclosure; a container; a physical entity in which the *shekhinah*, the indwelling divine essence, comes to bear upon our puny physical finitude.

I translated *maley* as "filled" or "filling." But it is much more than that. Eight ounces of water fills an eight-ounce metal cup. Forty-five thousand fans fill CitiField. "Filling" refers to capacity, which suggests limits. The "filling" in our parashah has no limits. It is the filling of the finite with Infinity itself.

And that filling is caused not by divine will, at least according to our Torah reading, but by human willingness. Human generosity. Human cooperation. Human yearning for – yes – fulfillment.

I will share a beautiful teaching from one of those Chassidic masters, and I will let its poetic language speak for itself. In it, Rabbi Yaakov Arye of Radzimyń (1792-1877) takes the seemingly limited language of place: tent, cloud, tabernacle, donations, even honor – and pushes them into service as describers of the wonder of wonders before us: the possibility and the capacity of loving humans to bring divinity to bear on all of existence; and the generosity of spirit that is at the heart of deep Jewish teaching.

Here is his text:

“Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Eternal’s *kavod* filled the Mishkan...” ...because the Mishkan was filled with the [people of] Israel’s love and longing for the Blessed Holy One. For the Mishkan and all its vessels and appurtenances derived from the heartfelt generosity and strong commitment of [the people of] Israel. In which case the Shechinah was able to prevail among them, to the end that there remained not a tiny crumb or a spot [in the universe] void of God’s presence, for everything was chock-full of the generosity of spirit and desire of the people of Israel. Therefore [the Torah teaches that] “the Eternal’s *kavod* filled the Mishkan, ie., the divine spirit of generosity and love filled the totality of all that is.

Would that we could retrieve that language to replace the avoidance behavior of our embarrassed locutions about our own beliefs. Would that we would allow that inspiring generosity that propels this community to reach beyond itself for each and every person, for each and every vital cause, for each and every challenge to human dignity – would that we would allow ourselves to see those generous acts as our own building of the vessels of the infinite Mishkan. Would

that we would look up – or look inward – and notice that the cloud has already encompassed us, and that we need only breathe it in like the breath of life at the dawn of creation.