

“Walking Upright”
 Rabbi Lester Bronstein
 Rosh Hashanah 5784 - 2023
 Bet Am Shalom, White Plains, New York

I.

The Saba of Slobodka (died 1927), believed that *musar* - Jewish ethics - needed to be taught *alongside* the study of the Talmud, lest students fail to grasp the centrality of ethics in Rabbinic Judaism. The Saba insisted that the students in his yeshiva dress decently, and that they walk upright (“*kom ’miyus*”), heads erect, and not slouched over.

Someone challenged him with the Talmudic statement by the Sages in Tractate *B’rachot*, “One who walks four cubits (*dalet amot*) with an upright posture is acting haughtily toward God (literally “pressing the legs of the *Shechinah*”). The Saba explained this as referring to an *internal* feeling of standing arrogantly upright, where the person does not lower oneself sufficiently to feel the *Shechinah*’s presence with each step one takes.

There is nothing wrong, though, he insisted, in walking “*kom ’miyus*,” with a straight upright posture. On the contrary, he taught, if one stands straight it helps one’s thinking patterns to be logical and clear (and, one supposes, to clear one’s mind for ethical thinking and behaving).

For the record, the Maharsha (Prague, died 1631) regarded that same comment in the Talmud as follows: “One who takes up even four cubits walking upright is acting as if he alone owned the space, rather than God who ‘fills the entire world.’”

So which is it? Should we be proud, or humble? Or, if you prefer the cynical approach, should we *feign* pride or humility?

And who is talking here? Jews of antiquity carving out a new low-profile spirituality under the yoke of Rome? Medieval Jews bending under the burden of unending exile and degradation? Modern Jews newly freed from the confines of ghettos and discriminatory laws?

Or the Jews of today, liberated by the secular *Zeitgeist* to go anywhere, live anywhere, be anyone, including becoming, say, Orthodox by choice, or *no longer even Jewish* - again, by choice.

Who are we Jews? Who are we *vis a vis* the One who awesomely brings the world into being on this day? Who are we *vis a vis* our relationship to our own story and that of the other peoples of the world? Who are we with respect to the ancient land that birthed us and spat us out and took us back yet again, and that provided us a refuge in our darkest time, and that continues to measure us against an ethical yardstick given us by both the Divine and ourselves, against which we always come up just short?

Who are we now, at this late date in our history, when we have so much to be proud of, and so much to atone for?

Do we, the Jewish people, walk *kom'miyut*, upright in the world, and especially, "upright in our land?" Are we personally as upright as we know we should be? Are we collectively as conscientiously upright as we know we want to be? Are we proud to practice the profound rituals and rigorous ethics of our tradition in an unabashed public way, or do we slouch over and try not to be seen taking this beautiful teaching, this "Torah," this "*etz chaim*" seriously?

Do we sing the great *niggun* of Jewish life in full voice, or in an embarrassed undertone?

And with respect to Israel, our modern manifestation of Jewish national self-determination, are we as ready to take responsibility for our indignities as we are eager to boast of our astounding successes? And the reverse question: Are we more eager to show embarrassment and dissociation from Israel because of its sins - *our* sins - than we are ready to stand proudly with Israel and work our whole lives through to help make it the Jewish democratic entity it can and must finally become?

II.

The Rabbis gave us thousands of words to recite on these ten days, words unique to the themes of this season. But they also gave us more basic words to recite *every* day. Here, in the daily prayer book, in the words that set up the *Sh'ma*, the central declaration of our relationship to the unity of all being, we are asked to recite the following - *every day*:

אַהֲבָה רַבָּה אֶהְבְּתֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ חֲמֵלָה גְדוֹלָה וַיִּתְּרָה חֲמֵלָתְךָ עָלֵינוּ: ...

With an abounding love You love us, Eternal our God. With great compassion do You care for us...

לְמַעַן לֹא יִבוֹשׁ וְלֹא נִפְלֵם וְלֹא נִכְשָׁל לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד ...

Keep us from shame, and from humiliation, and from stumbling, now and always...

וְהִבְיָאֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ וְתוֹלִיכֵנוּ קוֹמְמִיּוֹת לְאַרְצֵנוּ: ...

May you reunite our people in peace from all corners of the earth, leading us proudly “**upright**” to our land.

And likewise in the *Birkat Hamazon*, the daily blessing after a meal:

הַרְחֵמוּנוּ הוּא יִשְׁבֹּר עֲלֵנוּ מֵעַל צַוְאֵרֵנוּ וְהוּא יוֹלִיכֵנוּ קוֹמְמִיּוֹת לְאַרְצֵנוּ:

May the Merciful One break the yoke from our neck and lead us **upright** to our land.

Can you hear both the theme and the under-theme? The point and the counterpoint? The Rabbis, hoping against hope that they can create a tradition of words to somehow get us past both the degradation of Exile *and* our degrading

behavior that they believe brought the Exile on, are telling us to pray every day for pride - self-worth - *and* for the gumption to behave with *mentschlichkeit*, so that we might dare to deserve the pride we are learning to exhibit.

They want us to be proud of who we are, and they want us to keep that pride in perspective. Proud of who we are? They call that “chosenness,” and in our day that word, left unexplained, can only bring misunderstanding and divisiveness. No, “God,” as it were, does not “choose” us, which would be a theological and philosophical absurdity. We didn’t need Dr. Kaplan to tell us that. We only needed Kaplan to tell us to read Maimonides, who learned it from Aristotle, as did the Rabbis of the Hellenistic era long ago.

What the Rabbis mean by it is that we Jews, at least in their time and maybe ours as well, are Jews whether we like it or not, and that Jewish *history* has given us a destiny and a purpose. It has “chosen” us.

We can dodge the observances (at least in our age of choosing absolutely everything about ourselves). But we cannot dodge our obligations. Among those is to walk *kom'miyut*, upright, as the Jewish people in a world of both righteous and unrighteous peoples. To know damned well who we are, and to behave accordingly, and to be proud of it.

It means that we cannot trouble ourselves terribly with how others see us, but that we must be deeply concerned with how we see ourselves; and, if I may be permitted a leap of phrasing, we must care about how God sees us. Whether we believe in God literally, figuratively, metaphorically, poetically, conceptually, or not at all, we need to care about the way God sees us. We need to ask ourselves every day, indeed every minute, whether we are walking not only *humbly* before the One of Being, *הצנוע לכה/hatznea lechet*, as the prophet Micah puts it, but *upright* before the One of Being, *קוממיות/kom'miyut*, as our Rabbis insist on phrasing it.

As empowered modern Jews, whether religious or secular or some combination of the two, living in the miraculous and perilous time of the modern State of Israel, we - wherever we live in the world - must demand that our people walk upright in *our* land, the Land of Israel. We must once and for all own the fact that we are masters of our own land *and* of an occupied people in that same land, who do not

enjoy the protections of democracy we afford ourselves as their masters. We must never be too embarrassed, shy, or afraid to call out Jewish acts of discrimination, violation, corruption, degradation, and injustice in the Land of Israel; even as we must be sufficiently proud of ourselves to call out those same injustices against us.

We must decry antisemitism toward Israel and wherever we congregate as Jews, both globally and locally; *and* we must hear the Divine voice speaking in the parlance of the world when it rightly calls us to task for acts unworthy of our name. We must know the difference between antisemitism and *toch'chah*, legitimate moral criticism. **We must stand upright; and we must also *be* upright. They are two sides of the same sacred coin.**

Note that in both of those key daily liturgical phrases I quoted, the word *kom'miyut*, “uprightness,” is linked to the word *artzenu*, “our land.” The tradition thinks that we will always be linked in some way to “our land.” Jewish landedness is a given. That may not be a theological fact, but it is an historical one.

What is not a given is whether we will enable ourselves, by our ethical or unethical administration of “our land,” to remain there. We are “chosen” to make that existential choice, again and again. That choice denotes both history and theology. Every which way we look, it is our truth.

III.

Of course, there can be no Land of Israel or worldwide People of Israel if there is no *tevel*, no globe of Earth, and there can be no ethical relationship of Jews to all life if there ceases to be life, כל יושבי תבל. No democratic Jewish state in a world where democracy ceases to exist. No racial harmony and equity for Jews and our neighbors in a world where peoples generally cease to aim toward equity and human rights.

Therefore, our Jewish problems and our universal problems are *all* Jewish problems. They are all part of the agenda of the Jewish people, then, now, and forever more. We were “chosen” to take on that universal agenda. It is how we have always seen ourselves: either *kom'miyut*, or trying to *get* to *kom'miyut*.

The global ecological crisis; the international threat to democracy; the historic human stain of racism; the paucity of human rights and life-sustaining resources; *and* the stain of occupation and usurpation in our Jewish Land; *and* the struggle to bequeath a sense of legacy, literacy and pride to our Jewish children and grandchildren -

All of this is our task. What does Rabbi Tarfon famously say? לא עליך המלאכה /Lo alecha ham'lachah ligmor. We're not obligated to accomplish the inhuman task of completing the task, but we mustn't desist from doing our part and more.

Only once does the Torah itself employ the term *kom'miyut*, in the Book of Leviticus of all places. It presents it as a blessing, with a curse lurking in the background. Isn't that the way it always is!

Let the Torah, then, have the last word, and let us let it speak to our core as we begin yet another Jewish new year together:

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִהַיְתָוּ לָהֶם עֲבָדִים וְאֲשַׁבְּרֵ
מִטַּת עַלְכֶם וְאוֹלַךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמְמִיּוֹת:

I the Eternal am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk **upright**.

Kom'miyut. Upright into the land called ethicality, justice, dignity, and above all, *hatikvah* - **hope**.