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Calling Twice: The Paradox Within and Without

In our day, it can feel like an unaffordable luxury to think like a Chassid. A Chassid thinks like the Besht, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the 18th century Jewish spiritual renewal movement. The Besht introduces into Judaism a kind of hyper-literal reading of both Torah and Tefillah, by means of which all outer-directed language gets re-interpreted as inner-directed. Amalek threatens from without? No, “Amalek” is the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination pursuing you from *within*. Our people Israel wallow in Galut/Exile? No, *you* suffer from Galut/Distance from your own *neshamah*, which is a piece of the divine *neshamah*, the *Shechinah*. Our Jewish tribe writhes from the pain of disunity and disharmony? No, the disunity is within *your self*, within each and every Jew.

Thus it can be seen as irresponsible for us to look upon the core message of our Jewish tradition as some kind of spiritual psychology, almost as a self-help methodology rather than a religion of covenantal obligation.

Chassidische mumbo-jumbo is fine for Poland or Ukraine, where Jews hadn't a scintilla of hope for physical betterment, much less self-determination.

But once we could make things better – for ourselves, our families, our people, even for *all* people – could we then afford to spend even five minutes contemplating our navels?

Some would even argue that the current trend toward “spiritualizing” Judaism – the current re-Chassidizing of Jewish language and thinking - is one grand act of avoidance behavior. Thinking about Israel has become too hard, too frustrating, and too painful? American institutional Judaism has become too mundane, too politicized, and too expensive? Politics in general has become too unnerving and demoralizing? Identity Judaism has become too narrow, too tribal, too beside the point?

Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our teacher, had it right the first time! Retreat to Midian. Become a shepherd. Work on the quiet, contemplative inner self. Leave Pharaoh-ism to Pharaoh, and Hebrew-ism to the Hebrews. A pox on both their houses!

Along comes the God whose only identity is truth; truth in its starkest form. God spoils Moses's happy retirement. God self-presents at the burning bush. The bush is not consumed. Moses turns to notice. God sees that Moses notices. God calls Moses by name. Moses hesitates to respond. God calls a second time. Only then does Moses answer "*hineni.*" Then God adjures Moses to go back into the thick of things; to get involved; to make a difference in a way only he can do.

What happens here?

The Torah text itself presents a real-time event. One thing happens, and then another and another. For the Baal Shem Tov, as reported by his faithful disciple Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye in his commentary from 1780 on Exodus, "Ben Porat Yosef," the "real-time" of the event is much, much slower, and the events don't happen in quite the order we see them in the text.

First, Moses sees the bush and turns away, thinking it is a mirage (a *klippah*, he calls it). Then Moses hears his name being called – once. He is disoriented by this (*sh'mo hukshah lo* – "his 'name' confuses him"), because his extraordinary powers of perception allow him to hear a multiplicity of

meanings in his own name. He hears “all four worlds,” as these mystical masters phrase it. He hears everything from the most physically mundane, to the spiritually Platonic, all the way to the most abstract truths of Divinity itself. He hears in his name – and thus senses in himself – not only all that is pure and good, but also all that is evil and wrong, including all that is incompetent and even irresponsible.

Riddled with conflict, he does not answer God’s call. Why? Because, he wonders:

אחד בנושא הפכיים שני כוללת איך

“How can two opposites be contained in one subject?”

And if so,

ידו על הייחוד נעשה איך

“How could he himself achieve *yichud*/unity of spirit and of purpose – by himself?” How could he live with himself long enough to complete God’s assignment?

Then he has a crisis of faith. He realizes that *Shekhinah*, God’s mysterious indwelling reality, must also contain all evil as well as all good. How can such a paradox exist? And what can he himself do to right the world in the

face of such an awful truth? How can he agree to work for a God who not only allows evil, but somehow *contains* evil?

”יחוד והוא הפכיים שני שהם ורע טוב

“Good and evil. The two total opposites. And yet they exist within a unity – God’s unity.”

He looks and sees the bush burning. Why, he wonders, is it not being consumed? Is this not the chance for this paradox to use fire to cleanse itself of all its evil, once and for all? Does not the bush contain all that is evil in the physical world? Would this not solve the paradox and allow the world to make sense at last?

Then, and only then, does God call Moses’s name a second time. At that point he sees that the bush is not going away. Nor is the paradox. Nor is the truth of his people’s exile and suffering. Nor is his obligation to go back into the real “fire” and bring his people to freedom, and then to Sinai (which, not coincidentally, is where he is standing at this moment).

Hearing his name a second time, Moses “gets it”:

וקישור וחיבור, ייחוד זה ידי על שנעשה “משה” ׳ב פעם לו שאמר עד

The paradox comes together – makes a unity in his soul – and a bond and a connection.

As a result:

בעליונה התחתונה מדרגה

“The lowest rung is connected to the highest.”

And at last:

הנני אמר אז

“Only then does he answer *hineni*, I am here.”

Hineni does not mean “I’m present.” It means “I get it.” I “get” that both evil and good are not only *out there* in equal amounts, but also *in here*. I get that I will have to do serious inner work in order to recognize my own demons, conflicts, doubts, and inadequacies. I get that I can’t expect the world out there to be any better than the world in here or vice-versa. I get that the Voice will keep calling my name until I say yes, and even then it will not let up. Yes to eradicating what evil I can. Yes to healing where I can. Yes to comforting where I can. Yes to refusing to say I’m too old, too young, too tired, too unprepared, or too untalented to help.

Yes to hearing my name called, and no to demanding that the paradox of evil and good in the world be resolved before I agree to get involved. Yes to understanding that even if my name has to be called twice, or thrice, or a thousand times, I will have to give in at some point and say *hineni*.

This is why it is not only okay to think like an 18th century Chassid in the twenty-first century, but necessary. Necessary in order to see the paradox of the *yetzer* within us and without us; to work on it day and night; to own it; then to take our knowledge and skill to whatever the struggle is in our particular time in history; to be fully present, fully *hineni*.