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Waters of Chaos and Life

The source of life and the locus of Chaos are the same place. That is the water that we call up in the שואבה בית השואבה and that is the water that the שטיה שטיה holds in place. The Paradox is maddening but also enlivening. Inspiring.

So much is on our minds tonight.

Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are on our mind. Houstonians and Floridians are on our mind.

Rohingyans ethnically cleansed from Myanmar are on our mind. Syrians fleeing war who can't get into Westchester are on our mind.

Israel's safety and wellbeing are perpetually on our mind. The Israeli Rabbinate is on our mind as it continues to narrow the space in which we non-Orthodox religious Jews can be Jewish there. The human rights of Israeli citizens in the Bedouin and other minority groups, is on our mind.

Israel's increasing isolation on American campuses and in the international community weighs heavily on our mind.

In the wake of Charlottesville, our own pain as American Jews and the pain of Americans of color, is on our mind. I always take not one knee, but two, on Yom Kippur, to acknowledge the Sovereign of Sovereigns, the Kadosh Baruch Hu, whose blinding light leaves no shadow for anti-Semites, racists, and bigots to hide in.

Our Bet Am families are on our minds, those who have a member who is deathly sick; those in unexpected mourning for dear ones; those anxious about aging parents or struggling children.

A lot is on our minds. We have much work to do out there. Tonight, I invite us to pause, to study Torah, to reflect on perennial themes. And then to go back to work when the day is done.

We begin with a text. I am grateful to Professor Melilah Hellner-Eshed, the extraordinary teacher of midrash and kabbalah in Jerusalem, for teaching me and my colleagues at the Shalom Hartman Institute this summer the text that I am about to introduce to you. I had never laid eyes on it until she introduced it on the fast day of the seventeenth of Tammuz. On that day I wrote in my notebook, “Use for Yom Kippur. *Hafokh ba*. Everything is in it!”

Here is her text, from the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin:

When King David came to dig the foundations of the Temple, he dug fifteen thousand feet and had not reached the *T'hom* (the great waters of the Deep). Finally, he came upon a cluster of stones and was about to move the main stone, when the stone spoke to him and said: “Do not touch me! You are forbidden!”

“Why?” asked David.

“Because I am blocking the mouth of the *T'hom*, the great waters of the Deep.”

“And how long have you been here?” asked King David.

The stone responded: “From the time the Merciful One sounded the Divine voice [at Sinai] and said ‘*Anokhi A-donai E-lohecha* – I am the One your God.’ At that moment the earth trembled and the water sank and I was put here to block the waters of the *T'hom*.”

Even so, King David did not listen. And once he had lifted the stone, the Deep arose and was about to submerge the world.

David's mentor and nemesis, Ahitophel, came and stood there. He said, "Now the king will drown, and I will become king."

David said, "If there is someone who is wise enough to know the solution to this impending disaster and does not give it, may he suffocate."

David declared what he declared, and Ahitophel gave the solution. The solution was for David to begin singing the *Shirey Hama'alot*, the fifteen psalm-songs of ascent.

Even so, Ahitophel suffocated.

That's the midrash. There's a variation in the Babylonian Talmud where Ahitophel's solution is to write the mysterious four-letter name of God on a shard and drop it into the rushing waters, risking the crime of erasing the sacred name. The name is erased, the waters subside, and Ahitophel still suffocates.

And in yet another version, in Midrash Tanhuma, the stone is identified with the legendary *even sh'tiah*, the foundation stone of the entire universe, the stone upon which Abraham binds Isaac, the stone upon which Jacob lays his head when he dreams of the ladder reaching heaven, and the stone above which the altar of the Temple would be built.

In other words, the ground zero of all time and space, holding back the waters of chaos that God divided and separated at Creation, and that God later let loose upon the sinful world, and that God ultimately brought back under control and promised never to release again. Hence the stopper, placed by God's own command, well out of reach of all but the most ambitious and reckless of human beings.

Now King David comes along and threatens to destroy everything in a single act of hubris. Hubris eclipsing humility.

What happens here, and why do I bring this story to you on the eve of Yom Kippur?

For one, the midrash ostensibly presents itself as the "reason" for David's putative composition of the Psalms of Ascent, the *Shirey Hama'a lot*. Those psalms were probably used as "traveling music" when ancient Israelite pilgrims ascended the fifteen steps to the Temple courtyard in order to offer their festival sacrifices.

The psalms brim over with words of gratitude, hope, praise, aspiration, even humility. They represent the best of what humans strive for. "A psalm of ascents. I lift up my eyes to the heavens. Whence comes my help? My help

comes from you, O maker of heaven and earth, who will guard my going out and coming in from this time forth and forever.”

But the Temple arose after King David’s time, and so he could not have composed these liturgical poems. Our tradition reads them back onto David’s life in order to sing his praises, perhaps to clean up his sinful reputation.

In our midrash, David uses these psalms not as humble paeons to God, but as magical incantations, much like the formulae of the sorcerer’s apprentice, to tame the primal waters run amok. They are not praises, but manipulative devices. David, with his extraordinary talent for composing music and poetry, spends his gifts on a desperate attempt to fix his own terrible mistake and pretend that all is well, and that nothing was ever awry.

Hubris eclipsing humility.

Second, David finds this fragile epicenter of God’s cosmic power while digging the foundations for the Temple. What’s wrong with this picture? David has the blood of ruthless battle on his hands. He has the sins of adultery, subterfuge, and cowardly murder on his hands. He goes to God to

ask permission to build the Temple, to give God a “proper house” now that he the king has a house more elegant than God’s.

God refuses permission! David’s son will build the Temple, and then the people of Israel will be able to come together on God’s mountain in both repentance and joy. But David must learn that iniquity has consequences. Corruption has consequences. Yes, he apologizes when confronted by his prophet Natan, and this may serve as a useful lesson for Yom Kippur, as a sort of Bible story with a moral, if that is what we’re looking for.

But the real David forges ahead. He is determined that the Temple will have his name on it. He begins to build without a permit, as it were. And when he meets with a daunting obstacle placed in his way by the Ruler of the Universe, he is willing to risk destroying the world by plucking up that stone. As long as he can achieve what he wants, he doesn’t seem to care what happens to his people, his land, and all life.

Hubris eclipsing humility.

Third, the story serves as a cautionary tale about our relationship to the forces of nature, and to the God that creates and controls those forces.

Water. Wind. Fire. The ground shaking from its very foundations. Did the

ancient midrashists know something we still don't know? Did they know that there are limits to how much we can fool around with those forces before they break out of their natural boundaries and overtake us? Did they know that in every age we would need to control ourselves, limit ourselves, pace ourselves in our inevitable exploitation of the wondrous natural resources at our fingertips, and in the fascinating exercise of our scientific prowess?

Fourth, what about Ahitophel? The story could have worked without introducing him into the narrative. And yet, there he is.

He knows the secret, and he deigns to share it. Does he do so for the collective good? No, he does so for his own aggrandizement. He is that person who will help society as long as there is a profit for himself. He is more than happy to watch his king drown, and then to insinuate himself onto the throne. And his king is more than happy to take the help, and then to throw his comrade under the chariot.

What did our Rabbis want to teach us about loyalty? About integrity? About self-sacrifice? About the level of character we need to require from public servants? Why did they take beloved biblical folk heroes like David and his retinue and expose their dark side with these gnawing midrashim?

What were they afraid of in the human nature of their fellow Jews, so much so that they felt they needed to warn us against our own worst selves? What were they telling us about speaking out? About standing up *to* one another and *with* one another, against evil and for the good? About taking risks to save our own selves from those who also take risks – *outrageous* risks for nefarious self-serving ends?

Finally, what do these stories tell us about the human soul? What's down there, fifteen thousand cubits below the surface of *ourselves*?

What is that stone? The Rabbis sometimes refer to it as the navel of the world, the *tabur ha'olam*. Not the heart, but the navel. Not the seat of intellect or of love, but the connection point to the placenta that gives us our existence.

What is beneath that stone? Chaos, yes, primordial chaos, but also the ocean that spawns all life. The ocean that courses through the salty bloodstream of every living creature, including you and me. The physical, psychological, spiritual living waters, the *mayim chaim*, the *ma'ayan hay'shuah*, the salvific deep.

As Professor Melilah Helner-Eshed said herself in the context of teaching us these texts, “This idea can nourish, but it can also foster an egocentrism that leads to trying to control the center of everything.”

I think the Rabbis wanted us to let these texts run over us like so much water, as it were. To “feel” the effect of these stories rather than force them to correspond allegorically to precise people and issues in the world. They wanted us to meditate on these fascinating and frightening images. They wanted us to know these truths about ourselves, our leaders, our constituents, our communities, our pursuits, and our flirtations with greatness and with great evil.

They wanted us to be bold, but also to be careful. They wanted us to conduct our lives not as King David did, but as Moses and Channah did: Not with hubris, but with humility in the face of the One of All Being. Humility in our politics. Humility in our religious life. Humility in our loving and our parenting. Humility in our scientific pursuits. Humility in our self-assuredness. In our scholarship. In our sizing up of one another, and in our sizing up of our most favorite and least favorite person on earth, which is always our own struggling self, always treading water.

They gave us the magnificent and awful holiday of Yom Kippur so that we might think through those painful questions year after year. They wanted us to use Yom Kippur to put our temporal and annual topics and issues into a much larger context, the sweeping themes of chaos and meaning, of death and life affirmed.

But they also gave us *Sukkot* - as a time of letting the harsh realities of life wash over us like the waters of the ancient water drawing ceremony in Jerusalem, known in Hebrew as the *simchat beit hasho'evah*.

During the late Second Temple period, tens of thousands of Jews would gather spontaneously in the Temple courtyard each night of Sukkot, only days after Yom Kippur. They would draw water from the legendary *mei shiloakh*, or Pool of Siloam, and bring the water up to the altar, which they were well aware was built atop the *even sh'tiah*, the Foundation Stone or Navel of the World.

They would sing the verse from Isaiah to which we still dance the Mayim folkdance to this day: *u'sh'avtem mayim b'sason mima'a'eny hay'shuah* – “You shall draw forth waters from the wells of salvation.”

They would make circle after circle around the altar and the stone, pouring out water and raising their song to the upper reaches of joy.

Says the Mishnah, in the tractate Sukkah: "One who has not seen the rejoicing at the Place of the Water-Drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life."

Says the S'fas Emes: "The joy of the water drawing ritual is that we draw forth not only water, but the Holy Spirit, the *ruach hakodesh*. Joy is the *k'li*, the vessel with which we draw the living waters, the holy spirit, of which it says, 'God blew into his nostrils the breath of life.'"

So now, as we go from Yom Kippur to Sukkot next week, and then to the work of our chaotic world, may each of us find our water drawing vessel called joy. May we fill it not with the deadly floods of chaos, hubris, and hatred, but with life-affirming waters. May we pour them on the Foundation Stone of Being, on the altar of connection to God's goodness and blessing. May we go forth in humility, in dignity, in joy.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah. May we be sealed, and seal one another, with the foundation stone of life.