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“Hedyot”

I.

Word is out that I am among those invited to an ecumenical service on Friday morning at the Ground Zero Memorial with Pope Francis. It’s a huge honor, and yes, I’m excited about it, though I doubt I’ll get to meet him in a crowd of 500 religious leaders.

Nonetheless, people have asked me to get the Pope to put in a good word for the Mets - or the Yankees – depending on the fan. [These people obviously have no idea where my loyalties lie, but that’s fine.] Someone asked me to request that the Pope say a good word about Israel, or at least *for* Israel. Now there’s a point, although this Pope did travel to Israel under the guidance of his *havruta*, his religious text-study partner and soul mate, the esteemed Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Buenos Aires, whom I did meet and converse with back in April. My local Protestant colleague said I should urge the Pope to pay attention to the slave-labor conditions of tomato pickers in Immokalee, Florida. That, by the way, is one of the projects of T’ruah, the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

Let’s ask ourselves what we mean when we say we want to “ask the Pope to put in a good word” about this or that. To put in a good word in the press? In an encyclical? On his Twitter feed? Or to put in a good word *directly to God*? Do we mean by this that the Pope talks to God? That God listens to the Pope in a way that God does not listen to

other human beings? Do we mean that we don't believe any of this literally, but *just in case*?

I imagine this Pope telling us that we can speak with God just as directly and effectively as he can, *if not more so*. That's his main appeal for many hundreds of millions of people, including non-Catholics like our selves. Yes, thank God, he pushes a vibrant agenda on climate change and global warming. Yes, he shines a spotlight on the profoundly poor and on the root causes of poverty and economic disparity. Yes, he seems to want to liberalize (if ever so slightly and cautiously) some of the more archaic policies of the world's largest religious body, and thus to affect the wellbeing of populations around the globe in a way that we cannot.

But more than his policies, he touches people by letting us know that he thinks he is a person. He eats, drinks, sleeps. He attends to his bodily needs (and at his age, he is grateful for being able to do so). That's the main point: he is grateful, and he is preaching gratitude. *He is preaching awareness of – and gratitude for - the sanctity of the minutiae of life.*

II.

The institution of the Papacy is based on a central character in our own Yom Kippur drama: the High Priest, or *Kohen Gadol*. The original Kohen Gadol is Aaron, brother of Moses and Miriam. He doesn't talk to God, per se, though several times in the Torah God seems to include him when talking to Moses.

What he does is utter a formula for national forgiveness, once a year, on this day, as the culmination of a series of mystery rituals that somehow ready him for that task. And God – playing out God’s role in the drama – says, through Aaron, *tit’haru* – “you are purified,” meaning that all Israel are relieved of their sins and allowed to start over with their lives. Or, rather, with their *collective* life. It’s not clear that individuals matter so much in this drama. It’s the collective that counts.

Do we suppose that ancient Israelites during the Monarchic Period approached the Kohen Gadol prior to Yom Kippur to ask for special favors? A *mi shebeyrach* for their ailing mother? A prayer for *parnassah*, for economic prosperity in the year to come? For rains in their due season?

And what about in that darkening period of Jewish history just before the Second Temple fell at the hand of the Romans in the mid-First Century? Did someone whisper in the Kohen Gadol’s ear that he should communicate to God our anguish and despair? Or was it the case that by the time the Temple was ready to fall, no one believed that God could actually be communicated with *at all*? That the Kohen’s role was to play out a social-societal obligation that merely connected our people to their historical past? (Much the way so many Jews in our own day feel about the rituals of Yom Kippur? A quaint connection with the past; a check-in with our roots, and nothing more.)

III.

It turns out that we have a text that addresses this question most provocatively, mysteriously, even radically. It comes fairly early in the Babylonian Talmud, on page 7a of the first tractate, *B'rachot*. The editors of the Talmud insert this strange tale right after a series of statements by various Rabbis speculating as to whether God prays, and if so, what the content of God's prayer might be.

They base this question on their creative reading of a verse in Isaiah, "I will bring them to my holy mountain, *va'haviotim el har kodshi*, and make them joyful in my house of prayer," *v'simachtim b'veit t'filati*. The Hebrew of "my house of prayer" is *beit t'filati*. But they literalize the grammar to get "the house of *my* prayer, *t'filati*. If God says "my prayer," then God prays. What does God pray for? What the Rabbis seem to hope God prays for is a shift in the balance between divine mercy and divine judgment. Between divine forgiveness and divine anger. God, they hope, prays for the ability to *ekanes lahem lifnim mishurat hadin* – to enter into relationship with humanity by *going beyond the letter of the law*.

At this point, a Rabbi speaks up who also happens to be the Kohen Gadol (and whether this is historically true or just a convenient conceit is unclear). Here's the text: *It was taught [in a baraita] that Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the Kohen Gadol, said: Once [on Yom Kippur] I entered the innermost sanctum [i.e. the Holy of Holies] to offer incense, and I saw Akatriel Ya, Ado-nai of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. And he said to me, "Yishmael, my son, bless me." I said to him, "May it be Your will that Your*

mercy overcome your anger, and may Your mercy roll over Your [other] attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may you enter before them beyond the letter of the law.” He nodded his head. This teaches that you should not take the blessing of a hedyot lightly.”

IV.

First of all, what is a *hedyot*? Go and ask Pope Francis! A *hedyot* is an *ordinary person*. It is probably the origin of the word “idiot.” Not a fool or a dolt, but a regular, plain ol’ individual. A layperson. Someone with no particular status, connection, enlightenment, or gift of prophecy. Someone who could just pray what comes to mind or to heart, but with no expectation of being heard or acknowledged. Someone who prays because that is what plain ol’ people do.

What is odd about this story – beyond the fact that this Rabbi/Kohen Gadol seems to see a very physical vision of God hanging around in the Holy of Holies – is that he refers to himself as an ordinary person, a *hedyot*. And that this mysterious God figure *asks* him for a blessing rather than offering one. And, that this divine being seems to want or need a blessing in the first place! That somehow this God wants help getting out of the rut of judging without ample mercy. That this God worries he is following the letter of his own law too closely without finding a way to go beyond the letter of the law, so as to give his human subjects the benefit of the doubt.

This is a tale of a God who wants to do *teshuvah*. This poor God wants to change. And to whom does this God turn for help? Yes, to the Kohen Gadol. But this is a new breed of Kohen Gadol who sees himself not as interlocutor between us and the Divine, but as a *hedyot*, a person like other persons who is suddenly given the chance to matter. Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha thinks quickly on his feet. He goes for the jugular. He “blesses” God with a *tochechah*, a gentle reproof. God is not living up to the divine standards of mercy over judgment; of compassion over penalty; of latitude over the strict standards of law, convention, custom, norms, and expectations.

Strange that no colleagues seem to jump in and ask why Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha didn’t take this once-in-a-millennium opportunity to ask God to send the Mashiach! To send the Redemption, the return from Exile, the banishment of the Roman occupation. Not even to end hunger and violence. Not even to find a shidduch for everyone’s daughter and son! No one even comments on his mysterious encounter.

This is because they probably don’t believe he really had the vision in the first place. They know how Rabbis talk. This rabbi is merely using hyperbole to make a point, or several points. For one, he is inviting his colleagues to enter a new genre of “prayer.” This is the prayer of *k’ilu*. “As if.” Before, one prayed for “stuff.” rain, corn, wine, oil, life. By contrast, one prays this new kind of prayer *k’ilu*, “as if” God could hear and respond, but not believing that God actually could; *k’ilu*, “as if” God relied on *us*, us “plain ol’ folks,” to put otherwise abstract divine aspirations and values into human words. As if all prayer depended not on God at all, but on *us*. *K’ilu*.

Rabbi Yishmael's story is radical because it all but declares that God is at best in a *mutual* relationship with us, not a *dominant* one. It is more radical, however, because it clears away the entire past history of the Jewish people, in which the Kohen Gadol amounted to something extraordinary. He used to go into that little chamber and make something happen! Now he can't make *anything* happen. Yet now his contact with God matters more than ever before because he realizes he is a *hedyot*; a person like the rest of us. He is *achad ha-am*. He is one of us, which of course he was all along.

With this episode, we finally declare ourselves free of intervening holy men. Now we are all holy. Seen in another way, *none* of us is holy in the traditional sense, and the idea of getting God to "do stuff" is dead. From now on, what will matter is God's desire to have *rachmanus*, or mercy, prevail in the world. Yes, God wants us to love justice, but more than this God wants us to go beyond the letter of the law so as to bias the world toward mercy.

V.

If God no longer "does stuff;" if God no longer considers our specific requests and decides whether or not to act upon them; then what becomes of prayer? What becomes of Yom Kippur? I know you're thinking that my answer may determine whether we go through with this tonight or stop right now and go home to watch a movie!

The Rabbis give us one answer by simply changing the subject. Instead of discussing their chaver's epiphany, they go on to another story. In this next encounter, Rabbi Yitzchak asks his colleague Rav Nachman why he did not show up at the synagogue for the daily prayers. *La yachelna*, says Rav Nachman. "I could not." Maybe he was sick, or maybe weak from fasting. Rabbi Yitzchak responds, "Why not gather ten individuals in your home and pray?" Rav Nachman's reply is essentially, "I didn't want to put my neighbors out by asking them to do this for me." (Now *that* sounds familiar.) So Rabbi Yitzchak keeps trying: "Hey, you could have the congregation send a messenger to you when they gather to pray so that you could pray at home at the same time they do." (This is an early version of streaming the service via computer!)

The story ends with Rav Nachman saying to his chaver, "*mai kuley hai?*" Which basically means, "What's all this really about? Why are you *hocking my chainik?*" Here we learn that the story is simply a set-up to make the following profound point, as the Talmud continues:

[This same] Rabbi Yitzchak said to Rav Nachman, "As Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, 'what is the meaning of [the verse in Psalms 69], 'But as for me, let my prayer be for you, Ado-nai, in a time of favor'? *va'ani t'filati l'cha a-do-nai eit ratzon*. When is "a time of favor"? *eymatai eit ratzon?* Answer: *B'sha'ah shehatzibur mitpal'lin*. At the time when the congregation gathers for prayer."

Do you see what he is driving at? He wants his chaver to show up for the *community's* prayer. Yes, Rabbi Nachman is fulfilling his personal obligation to daven, but not with the community! The fact that he davens is less important by far than his helping the community to daven by showing up! Here Rabbi Yitzchak goes so far as to quote the great Second-century mystic and legalist Shimon bar Yochai in order to make the upending theological claim that what the Hebrew Bible means by *eit ratzon*, “a time of favor,” has to do not with what God wants but with what the *hedyotim*, the plain folks, *need!* They need every last *nachshlepper* to be present! Every member of the *hoi polio*. Just us folks. This, they're saying, is what will make God happy – “satisfied,” *l'ratzon*.

Here's the message in a nutshell: At some point in our history, prayer morphed and became the act of being present in and for the community, so as to share its burdens and its sacred tasks, i.e. the tasks the community must perform together when the hour of prayer is over. And this made Yom Kippur the day of showing up and sharing the burden *par excellence*.

This must be why, centuries later, a Chassidic master took the verse “As for me, let my prayer be *for you*” and pushed it to the max, so that it became “As for me, *let me be my prayer*.” *Va'ani t'filati*. I don't *have* a prayer; I *am* my prayer. My “showing up” is my offering.

VI.

If you yourself walked into the sacred inner precinct and encountered this same apparition, and it asked you for a blessing, what would you say? Would you run for the exit? Would you let loose all of your decades of bottled up anger at God? Would you find it in yourself to express gratitude for the years of plenty bestowed upon you as if by total chance? Would you say that you're not the Kohen Gadol, not the Pope, not a big shot holy person in any way-shape-or-form, but that as a grateful beneficiary of the gift of life, you would be happy to say a few words of thanks on behalf of your fellow regular persons?

VII.

So let me close with a few words of thanks from a self-declared regular person, namely the Pope I might meet on Friday. Toward the end of his long and forceful encyclical on climate change, poverty, economic injustice, the world-wide culture of waste, and the tragic devaluing of living things, he waxes a bit rhapsodic. He tells us that in order “to overcome that unhealthy anxiety which makes us superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers,” we should follow this advice:

“We [should] stop and give thanks to God before and after meals. I ask all believers to return to this beautiful and meaningful custom. That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need.”

On this day that is our annual gift from our own precious history - the history of our people, *Am Yisrael* - let us first of all be *grateful*. Let us be *humble*. Let us *turn* our lives toward the *merciful* and good. Let us help God, *k'ilu*, to go beyond the letter of the law and judge with the benefit of the doubt. Let us find a way to *show up* for one another and share the huge burden of our time. And finally, let us *be* our prayer. Let us *be* our prayer.
