

The Redemptive Power of Hebrew

Kol Nidre 5770

One of the truly great stories of the Hasidic tradition is the tale of how successive generations of Jewish leaders averted disaster facing the Jewish people. Elie Wiesel, in the preface to his book *Gates of the Forest*, recounts the story:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Lieb of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is ask You to redeem us, and this must be sufficient."

And it was sufficient.

It is a classic Hasidic tale emphasizing the power of *kavannah*. That is, it's not the rituals we do but the heart we put into them. It's not enough to just light candles on Shabbat, to abstain from eating pork, to show up for Shabbat every week. It's not enough to go through the motions. Not that any of these things are wrong. But for the mitzvah to have meaning and potency, then it is our *kavannah*—the intentionality of one's heart—that makes the mitzvah.

But I have a problem with this story.

Don't get me wrong. The idea that *kavannah* is central to the performance of a mitzvah is indisputable. Distinguishing between rote performance and directed intentionality is among Hasidim's greatest gifts to Judaism. I will always be grateful to my teacher, Jakob Petuchowski (z"l), for authoring the landmark essay *Keva and Kavannah*. Jewish prayer, Petuchowski argues, is a combination of *keva*—structure, order, design to a service, and *kavannah*—the soul we put into our prayers. We come to these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, year after year knowing that the prayers will look the same. *Avinu Malkeinu. Al Chet. Ashamnu. Kol Nidre*. They're always here. In the same order. This is *keva*. Structure. A landmark of Judaic liturgy. But for the prayers to have meaning, there must be something to our praying. The words are the body, but the *kavanah* is the soul. Without *kavannah*, without intent and directionality, without an attempt to move the prayer, they are just words.

It's clear—at least for me—that the point of the Hasidic tale is to emphasize the redemptive power of *kavannah*, namely that God does not perform miracles for us because we do a particular ritual in a particular way. God will answer our prayers if they are sincere. A reminder, even more a warning against empty rituals. But by the same token, there's something

about this story that makes me uneasy. Because it's also intimating that we can forget, from generation to generation, the bits and pieces that comprise Judaism, yet—if we retain our *kavannah*—we'll be alright. That we can lose the rituals, the prayers, the things that have collectively comprised the outward expression of our Jewishness, and that God will redeem us still, if our hearts are in the right place.

Maybe. Maybe it's so. Maybe God will redeem us, even after we've forgotten how to do the things that make us Jews. I do believe this. I believe God will rescue us—no matter what—for no other reason save that God wants Jews. But I wonder, were we to take the story to its logical conclusion, how many Jews would there be left to save?

Take a moment and stop to think about what direction we as a people are going in when it comes to doing Jewish things. Think back to our parents and their parents and their parents before them. If we had to answer the following question—*In terms of Jewish observance, are we a) more observant, b) equally observant, or c) less observant when it comes to Jewish behaviors?*—how do you think most of us would answer? Of course, the question is rhetorical. We all know the answer. The overwhelming majority of Jews do less than their ancestors. Whether it's synagogue attendance, Shabbat and festival observance, maintaining the dietary laws, study of Torah—you name it, we do less. By the same token, as the story suggests, we're still here. In fact, I would argue that while we may do less, what we do we do more from the heart. Whereas for our ancestors they did *Jewish* because they had no choice, for us the expression of Judaism is permeated with a kind of born-again passion.

Last Sunday morning (the second morning of Rosh Hashanah) was, for me, a blessing. Not just because I didn't have to do anything during the service, but *precisely* because I didn't have to do anything in the service. We had members of the congregation join with the Cantor in leading the congregation in prayer, a member of the congregation calling other members of the congregation up to *bimah* to chant Torah, yet another member of the congregation sound the *shofar* and even yet another member of the congregation teach us in a sermon. In the synagogue in which I grew up, the closest a member of the congregation ever got to the *bimah* was if they were seated in the front row.

Today when Jews build *sukkot*, they do it because they want to. When they tell their kids they're not going out on Friday night until *after* they sit at the Shabbat dinner table, they do it because they love Shabbat. We are of a generation that understands that it's no longer enough to simply be born Jewish. We all—in one way or another—need to become *Jews-by-choice*. Such is the blessing of living in a time when we are free. It's kind of a rare thing for us Jews.

But the sword of freedom cuts both ways. We are as free to let go as we are to embrace. And it is what we have let go of that I want to talk about tonight.

This past March I had the opportunity to spend a day touring archaeological sites in Israel's *Galil* with Reuven Kalifon, a history teacher at NFTY's *Eisendrath International Exchange* high school program just outside of Jerusalem. Reuven, by all accounts, is eccentric. But he gets your attention. At lunch he started into a diatribe of what was wrong with diaspora Jewry. (This is not uncommon among diaspora Jews who have made *aliyah*.) "The problem with Judaism outside of Israel," he said, "is you no longer have a Jewish language." "Language," he went on, "is the single most important factor in determining identity." It is, I admit, a compelling thesis.

It's not iron-clad. No doubt there's room for discussion. Yet it's not hard to see how influential language is in the shaping of one's identity. Just ask the French and English speakers of Quebec. Or the Spanish speakers throughout the United States. And even as one's identity is forged by multiple factors, there can be little doubt that one's language is a central piece to the puzzle. Perhaps *the* central piece.

Reuven argued that day that the single biggest issue facing Jews in America today is the absence of a Jewish language. For previous generations of Jews in the United States, Yiddish was the language of the Jews. In fact, it was so central to their identity that most Yiddish speakers called it *Jewish*. "You speak *Jewish*?" They were equally adept at Hebrew. They may not have spoken it conversationally, they may not have been able to precisely translate the Hebrew of the Torah or the *siddur*, but they knew it. It was not a foreign language to them.

There are, to be sure, a lot of reasons why this is no longer the case for us. Largely based on a desire to assimilate, to blend in, our ancestors willingly abandoned the language of the "old country". "I speak *American*," my grandparents' generation would profess. They sent their kids to *Hebrew School*, but everybody knew it was just to get them through the Bar Mitzvah. In the street, however, and at home, the languages of the Jewish people were no longer of value. In some homes they were even considered "*verboten*".

The result has been an identity crisis of unprecedented scope. The only Jews born after World War II who speak *Jewish* are living in Crown Heights and Monsey. And while many of us and our children are able to decipher Hebrew on some level, it too has become a *foreign* language. And that's the tragedy. It's a "foreign" language. We're not simply ignorant of it; we no longer identify with it. As a people—and I think most of us would still contend we are a *people*—we are without language. We are culturally illiterate.

No doubt not of coincidence in his discussion with us that day in March, Reuven published an essay in *The Forward* one month later. Entitled "Making Hebrew a Priority," he wrote:

"Many would argue that the Americanization of the Jews has been a tremendous success, while perhaps a few still express pain and mourning over the loss of an irreplaceable cultural uniqueness...Indeed, together with its sense of pride in many realms of endeavor, American Jewry seems to have given up on the possibility of any Jewish creativity in the Jewish language. In so doing, it has turned its back on the legacy of an ancient civilization that has almost always expressed itself in Hebrew characters...[This] is the historic failure of American Jewry: So very few understand that language is the central carrier of culture, and so very few are aware of the power of a Jewish language in establishing individual and collective identity."

I agree. I believe we have abandoned our *mama loshon*, our "mother tongue"—be it Yiddish or Hebrew—and we are poorer for it. Even more, if it is true that language is central to the development of identity, then the future of the Jewish people as a culturally and ethnically unique tradition is very much in question.

Put another way, I don't know—even should our hearts be in the right place—if it would be, as our Hasidic story would have it, sufficient.

But there's another story. Another Hasidic story. Also about the Ba'al Shem Tov and also revolving around the question of redemption. As told by Elie Wiesel (in his book *Souls on Fire*):

The BeSHT—the Ba'al Shem Tov, literally the *Master of the Good Name*, the founder of Hasidism and renowned as a worker of miracles—once again attempted to force God's hand to bring about the final redemption. He had tried many times before—and failed. But this time he was one step away from success. The heavens were in an uproar. The angels were dancing. But Satan was red with anger, filled with outrage. Before God Satan protested, “How dare the man take matters into his own hands? Does the world deserve redemption? Have the conditions to warrant the coming of Messiah been met?” God could not argue. Satan was right. The BeSHT was premature; his generation was not yet ready for Messiah. And since the nature of the universe cannot be disturbed with impunity, the Ba'al Shem Tov and his faithful scribe Reb Tzvi Hersh Soifer were deported to a distant uncharted island, where they were promptly taken prisoner by a band of pirates.

“Master,” Tzvi Hersh pleaded, “do something. Say something.”

“I can't,” the BeSHT replied. “My powers are gone.”

“What happened to your secret knowledge?” Tzvi Hersh begged.

“Forgotten. Everything is forgotten. I remember nothing.”

But when the Ba'al Shem Tov saw Tzvi Hersh's despair, he was moved to pity. “Don't give up, my friend. We still have hope. You are here. Perhaps you can save us? Do you remember anything I have taught you? Anything, a prayer, a parable.” Anything will do.”

“Nothing,” he said. “I remember nothing.”

“You really remember nothing,” the Master asked again, “nothing at all?”

“Nothing, Master, nothing...except...”

“Except what?” the BeSHT urgently asked.

“...the *alef-bet*. I remember the *alef-bet*. Nothing more.”

“Then what are you waiting for,” the Master shouted. “Start reciting. Now!”

And so Reb Tzvi Hersh Soifer slowly, painfully began to recite “...*alef-bet-gimmel-dalet*...” the sacred letters that contain the mysteries of the universe. And the Master, impatiently, repeated after him, “*Alef-bet-gimmel-dalet*...” And they started all over again, from the beginning, and soon—slowly but surely—it all began to return to the Master, and he, in turn, rediscovered his powers allowing the two to return home, wiser and more nostalgic than ever before. The *alef-bet* had restored them to themselves.

Maybe this is how it has to be for us? More than just a cultural legacy, the languages of our people—from Yiddish to Ladino to Aramaic, all rooted in the *Lashon Kodesh* or sacred tongue of Hebrew—contain the power to redeem. That which we have lost contains the very key to our redemption.

Among the most historic anecdotes of the Soviet Jewry movement takes place, nearly 40 years ago, in the Great Synagogue in Moscow. Thousands of Jews had shown up when they heard a rabbi had come to Moscow to lead High Holy Day services. Despite the dangers of publicly acknowledging their Jewish identity, these thousands of Jews poured into the historic synagogue under the watchful and vindictive eyes of the infamous KGB. But once inside it was clear, they knew nothing. Not a single prayer. Not a single word of Hebrew. They had been so

distanced from their Jewish heritage for so long, nothing was remembered—save that they were Jews. The rabbi, seizing the opportunity, asked them to repeat after him. “*Alef-Bet-Gimmel.*” And so they did. Letter after letter. First just a few scattered voices. Then a few more. Then more. And more. Until—by the time the rabbi got to “*Resh-Shin-Tav*”—the entire synagogue was filled with sounds it had not heard in more than three generations.

This was the beginning of what many consider to be the single largest phenomenon of Jewish renewal in modern Jewish history. A quarter century later, the Soviet Union collapsed (in many ways due to the inspiration of the civil disobedience of the Soviet Jewry movement), the gates burst open—paving the way for those very Jews to reclaim their heritage.

These letters and the words they form have the same power and potential for us. In them are the mysteries and the beauty of all things Jewish.

And so this year we are devoting ourselves—as a community—to re-enchanting ourselves with the Languages of the Jewish people, particularly in our adult learning program. Learn Hebrew. Listen to Ladino songs. Attend the Yiddish theater. All here in this building this coming year. And join with me on Sunday mornings to deepen your understanding of Judaism by expanding your vocabulary of Jewish words. Not Hebrew words or Yiddish words, but *Jewish* words. Learn what it means to speak *Jewish* and, as we pray daily in our recitation of the *Shema*, “...teach them diligently to your children, speak of them when you are at home and when you are out, when you go to bed at night, and when you rise in the morning, put them as a sign on your hand and between your eyes, and inscribe them on the doorposts of your home.” They are more than words. They are gifts from our ancestors bequeathed to us to give to our children. They are the stones of our souls. They are our foundation. And they are our hope.