

Between the Wings of the Cherubim
Kol Nidre 5768
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This summer I read an essay by Barbara Kingsolver called “Small Wonder.” It is a response to the post-9/11 world, through the eyes of a novelist and poet. I want to thank Gordon Grant, who recommended that I read it. Or maybe it was more like demanded that I read it. When he handed me the tape from which he had listened to it, since it was following his eye operation, he said simply, “You have to check out the story about the bear.”

So, the story about the bear, a true story, in short, goes like this: In a remote Iranian village, a sixteen-month old boy wandered off. After a few days and nights of terror spent by the boys’ parents and other loved ones, the boy was found by the father and his search party, five kilometers outside of the village, curled in the arms of a she-bear. The boy was safe, warm, and smelling of milk.

Kingsolver poses the question we each might ask: “How is it possible that a huge, hungry bear would take a pitifully small, delicate human child to her breast rather than rip him into food?” In answering her own question, she continues,

But she was a mammal, a mother. She was lactating, so she must have had young of her own somewhere—possibly killed, or dead of disease, so that she was driven by the pure chemistry of maternity to take this small, warm neonate to her belly and hold him there, gently. You could read this story and declare “impossible,” even though many witnesses have sworn it’s true. Or you could read this story and think of how warm lives are drawn to one another in cold places, think of the unconquerable force of a mother’s love, the fact of the DNA code that we share in its great majority with other mammals—you could think of all that and say, Of course the bear nursed the baby. He was crying from hunger, she had milk. Small wonder.

Kingsolver describes the story as “a parable that I keep turning over in my mind, a message from some gentler universe than this one. I carry it like a treasure map while I look for the place where I’ll understand its meaning.”

So where might this treasure map lead us?

I’d like to begin down that trail with the help of another parable of sorts. This one is about a calf, and two winged, angelic creatures called cherubim. It begins with the birth of a people, named the Children of Israel, who were born through the straits of the Sea of Reeds, otherwise known as the Red Sea. They were led by a prophet named Moses, who was guided by a God named *Ehyeh*, “I Am,” or “I Will Be.” When the Children of Israel reached a mountain called Sinai in the midst of the wilderness, Moses left them and ascended the mountain to meet with Ehyeh and receive the teaching to guide his people. But he was gone for some time, forty days in all. And before he returned, the people grew anxious and felt alone and unstable out there in the wilderness. They asked Moses’ brother Aaron to make them another god, anything to give them a sense of security. Aaron agreed to do so, and gathering the gold from all their jewelry, made it into a molten calf. The people rejoiced, “This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Upon hearing and seeing this spectacle, Ehyeh and his prophet Moses grew angry. But after some raging and tablet-smashing, Ehyeh took mercy on the Children of Israel, and agreed to give them something through which they could feel a sense of his presence.

This God told the Children of Israel to build a *Mishkan*, a portable sanctuary that would accompany them on their wandering through the wilderness. Within it, they could worship God in right fashion. At the center of Mishkan, on top of the cover of the ark in

which sat the tablets of the teaching, would be placed two gold cherubim—these winged, angelic creatures. They would face one another. God revealed to Moses, “There I will make Myself known to you, and I will impart to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people.”

Within Jewish tradition, it is the building and worshiping of the golden calf, rather than the eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden, that is the quintessential biblical sin. “*This* is your god.” That, in my opinion, is the essence of the transgression. It was that the people could point to a solid object, one that they could see and touch, and say *this*. This is God.

In the *Mishkan*, God is portrayed not in the object itself, but in the empty space between. God meets the children of Israel in an undefined territory. The pointing, in this case, is merely a pointing *toward*.

For years I have reflected upon this distinction between the golden calf and the Mishkan, the solid object and the space in between solidity, and derived the message that God is a mystery, unknowable and distinct from this world in which we dwell. And I would not refute that. It is simply that the realm of the mysterious has grown in my mind. As we assert that God is a mystery that cannot be made molten, so we affirm that life resists a mold just the same.

Any parable, whether about a bear and a baby, or a calf, two cherubim, and a God named “I Am,” comes to teach us about our own lives. Surely we would not take from the parable of the bear that we should feel free to leave our young children unattended, at the mercy of nature’s wild forces. Only a fool would walk away trusting so blindly as to

assume that no harm will ever come if we simply do no harm to another. Rather, the tale asks us to consider that within every she-bear, every ferocious man-eating she-bear, there is a mother. There is a beating heart that longs to nurture and be nurtured. It's a parable and so, even though this one is true, it is far-fetched. As a parable, it serves as a metaphor for life, for human life. Seen in this way, it is not so far-fetched. Through it, we are being asked to recognize the humanity, not of bears, but of *humans*.

I have yet to meet a human being that I can sum up in a nutshell, that I can mold into a solid representation, that I can nail down and say "this." We are all far richer than our last act, infinitely more dynamic than the impressions others form of us. Our tradition teaches that each person is an entire world. We each, every human being on this earth, contain an abundance of dreams and experiences that collectively form who we are. And yet I find that it takes great effort to resist casting others in a fixed image. The tragedy of making people an inch tall, as I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, is not simply that they become small, it is that they become *limited*. They become frozen in our impression of them. We see a solid fragment where there in fact lives an ocean of being.

Some time ago, a person emailed me a harsh response to an article I had written. He made grand, reactionary pronouncements about the implications of my statements. Upon first reading it, I was shaken. I had the urge to fire off an equally biting email in return. Instead, I took my time and composed a confident yet conciliatory letter. I appreciated his passion, and identified a number of concerns that we shared about the situation at hand. I humbly responded to each of his attacks, and invited him to continue the dialogue or not. I thanked him for writing.

In the next email, he asked me to excuse his “hot-headed” email. He returned to the issues more thoughtfully and respectfully, despite our disagreements. He sent another email immediately following, a postscript. He reflected on the stages of his first reading my article, then writing me, and then receiving my response. This is what he wrote: “You went from someone to whom I reacted only to a catch phrase, to someone who provided an empathic response, which helped tremendously in my being able to humanize and tune in with you for more constructive dialogue. I guess that's a general rule of life.”

What a turnaround! I really didn't do anything profound, except to refrain from biting back. That was all he needed to be able to, as he said, *humanize* me. Amazing when we put it like this, but sometimes—often—it takes quite an effort simply to humanize a human being. Before that moment, I was little more than, in his words, a “catch phrase.” What a perfect expression. He located a phrase through which he was able to *catch* me. To bottle me, to cast me in a mold and say, “this.” And then I surprised him; because that mold is not me. Once he recognized that I actually wanted to interact with him, human to human, rather than fire simplistic attacks at one another's diminished caricatures, we found our way to a warm, if at times heated, dialogue. I love his closing line: “I guess that's a general rule of life,” he said. Yes, that is it exactly. It is a general rule of life. Not a precise law that can be held up against every challenge. If one were so inclined, he or she could offer countless examples demonstrating that people cannot be trusted to respond in kind. But in my experience, this is a general principle that holds true far more often than not: When we extend ourselves in humility, respect, and curiosity we have a tendency to disarm those who might otherwise view us as their adversaries.

Barbara Kingsolver unpacks the parable of the bear on a global scale. The leap to that from the interpersonal is natural. She questions the fixed and certain nature with which we often view the world and its inhabitants. As we do with individuals, so we do with entire groups of people. Having grown up in Kentucky, she reflects back on beginning first grade in a segregated public school. She asserts that the borders by which we define our society—physical, intellectual, economic and otherwise—demand constant reinforcement, or else they crumble. They do not hold up on their own, she argues, but rather aim to create fixity where it is neither necessary nor helpful. She asks us to consider the notion that, as in the case of racial segregation and countless other societal assumptions of law and truth, there are ways in which we see the world today that will similarly pass away with time. In regards to her experience with de-segregation, she writes, “Time and again the bear they had sworn would rip us limb from limb was begrudgingly allowed a place at the table, and behold, it used a fork and a spoon.”

When we refuse to have our assumptions questioned or challenged, we arrive at fundamentalism. We assert that we can know perfectly, that we can cast a mold and say “this”: this bear; this god; this people.

Fundamentalism is, sadly, not absent from Judaism. But when I look at our tradition, I see corridors through which to walk in embrace of genuine questioning and ambiguity. Some of you have heard me share the finale to the famous argument between two main schools of rabbis, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. Regarding their disparate stances, the Talmud ultimately declares, “These and these are the words of the living God.” The two schools could have been torn apart by conflict. Instead, they each assumed a wide enough perspective to imagine the possibility that their way was not

the only way. We, in turn, are asked to hold the complexity of the multivalent world in which we live. The model of Hillel and Shammai, in which we honor different and even opposing beliefs and practices, flies in the face of fundamentalism. All the way back to the Bible, we are given heroes such as Abraham, who argues with God when he learns of the plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. And our very name, Israel, is bestowed upon Jacob, for he was *Yisrael*—one who struggled with God. We are not asked to believe that life or God is cast in a mold. Rather, we are urged to experience them as living, breathing realities demanding openness and imagination.

There was a recent memoir published about the Bush White House, by journalist Robert Draper, entitled *Dead Certain*. It's quite a title. I've never given much thought before to the expression, "dead certain." It seems to say that the clearest picture of certainty we can attain is in death, when all has been laid to rest. Anything living contains too much movement to be cast with as much certainty. The golden calf is dead. The space in between the cherubim pulses with life. When the president says, "You're either with us or against us," he casts our national identity in stone, draining its life and creativity. According to a review in the New York Times, the memoir, written with the help of unprecedented insider access, including several personal interviews with the president, tells of how President Bush "dislikes criticism and bad news." The review states that the book is "studded with examples — on matters ranging from the Iraq war to Hurricane Katrina — of aides failing to deliver distressing information to the president or failing to persuade him to grapple quickly with unfortunate developments." I have no wish to focus on the president. I must recognize that there is much more to him than I know. But as he presents himself, or is presented, to the world, he represents one of the greatest public

denials of the essential ambiguity of our existence in this life. I am not surprised to hear that he avoids distressing information and unfortunate developments. Such a worldview is like a heavily inflated balloon that allows nothing in, or even near, at risk of the whole thing popping.

Unfortunately for our world, fundamentalism tends to breed more of its kind. I have been disheartened by the number of interactions I have had with fellow critics of the president, who cast their argument in similarly extreme language. The dehumanization simply shifts parties. I have been particularly saddened, because it touches our community and a place I think of as a home, by those who have turned such rhetoric on Israel. I had a recent exchange with an individual who refused to acknowledge any suffering or fear on the part of Israelis. In speaking with him, I was terrified by the lack of recognition of any ambiguity to the situation. Israel was synonymous with oppressor. It was clear as I proposed the most basic of validations for Israel in a gentle and reasonable manner, that his views were simply too fixed to entertain such complexity. At some point, as we all do in some way or another, he chose his black and his white, his good and his evil. Allowing them to mix feels at times too complex to bear.

At the same time, I have had difficult conversations about Israel with fellow Jews, some of whom refuse to see the Palestinians as anything but terrorists. Another balloon, another golden calf. Where are the cherubim when we need them? In my time in Israel and the territories, I have seen enough to know that there is much I do not know, more beyond what I can see. The Palestinian people, like the Israeli people, like the American people, like the Iraqi people, are made up of individuals. All I need is to behold one human life, one human face, one dinner table, one walk to school, to know that I cannot

sum it up in a nutshell.

I see the potential challenge, that what I am saying amounts to moral relativism. But operating from recognition of ambiguity does not mean that we refrain from making choices. We take stances. We exercise discernment. But what would our lives look like, what would the world look like, if we each *began* the discernment process from an appreciation of uncertainty? What if we put that foot forward in initiating each interaction, however large or small? What if we simply held onto the possibility that our assumptions may be wrong, or at the very least, incomplete? If we reminded ourselves that within the she-bear there lives a mother?

Jewish tradition teaches me to measure myself not by knowledge, but by learning. It guides me in emphasizing human relationship over the need to be right. It affirms that in life there is endless possibility.

In the year to come, let us set aside our golden calves, and instead meet the world from between the wings of the cherubim.

Gamar Hatimah Tovah. May we be sealed for a good and healthy year—all of us, all Israel, and all who dwell on earth.