

EDITOR'S NOTE

“I HEARD IT IN A WHISPER” R. SHMUEL B. NAHMAN ON THE ORIGIN OF LIGHT

Man is in love and loves what vanishes, What more is there to say?

W. B. Yeats

Their clothing was ripped in the front, the rabbis who sat on the bank of the Danak River, returning home from the funeral of their teacher, having their lunch. Was their meal a shared one, because they had chosen the spot, or solitary? In other words, should their *birkat ha-mazon* following the meal include the formal invitation that is recited only when three have broken bread together? R. Ada b. Ahava remarked, Rav has left us, and here we are, unable to decide a simple halakhic question. He turned his garment, so that the back now was the front, and rent it a second time, as the enormity of his loss dawned upon him with new force. (*Berakhot* 42b)

Who has not heard this text at funerals and other memorials? Some of us have preached it. Two lessons are predictably derived from the story. One is remorseful: we failed to appreciate properly the dead person. There is so much we could have learned from him or from her, and now it is too late. If only we had paid more attention, we could have gained so much that now is lost forever. The second is that it may not be too late to do for others what we failed to do for the object of our mourning. Let us not squander opportunities that remain. Regret and resolution: the two pillars of repentance. Properly cultivated, they indeed promote an enhanced awareness of the uniqueness of every human being, a greater sense of individual dignity and a more probing appreciation of what each person has to offer.

To what avail? Even as we heed the paradox of R. Ada b. Ahava, the irreversibility of the past exposes our regrets in their futility, and the next funeral proves resolve ephemeral. It is not a matter of indolence and bad faith, nor even the cumulative unfeasibility of doing justice to a multitude of individuals while pursuing our own lives. Nor is it even the kind of metaphysical regress familiar from *Tristram Shandy*, whereby any attempt at full narration perpetually falls behind itself. If all our moments were dedicated to salvaging the infinite uniqueness of our mentors and our fellows, if all our organs were transformed into ears and eyes intent on

TRADITION

retaining each valuable impression, no effort on our part can be adequate to the task. The inexhaustibility of the human being is part of what makes him mysterious. To know this is to recognize better what is meant when the human being is called the image of God.

Consider the following two scenarios: Reuven has taken R. Ada b. Ahava's lament to heart. He is intent on making the most of every opportunity to benefit from his contemporaries, to observe and collect every item so that, when the person is gone, the record he has compiled and the interviews he has conducted will fill the void and obviate, as much as is humanly possible, the absence that caused R. Ada b. Ahava to tear his clothing the second time. Reuven is clever and industrious. He is proud of his achievement. He is satisfied that he has learned the moral of the Gemara and has done his duty as well as it can be done. Shimon, by contrast, has not assembled a research portfolio on the deceased. When he thinks of R. Ada's response he is overwhelmed by the brute absurdity and wastefulness of death, R. Yohanan's dejection at the thought of "this magnificent beauty licking the dust," (*Berakhot* 5b) this beauty lost irretrievably, lost forever. Which one understands the deceased best? Reuven knows more about him; he is better positioned to produce a biography, to retell anecdotes, to answer FAQ's. If the deceased had an opinion on a halakhic or worldly question, Reuven knows it. Shimon cannot perform these services; he is not well informed. He has only one advantage over Reuven: Shimon knows what it means to be a unique, irreplaceable human being.

The artificial dichotomy I have drawn between Reuven's hard-working and self-satisfied curiosity and Shimon's emotionally deep but cognitively shallow meditation is deliberately extreme. Surely we honor the image of God not by composing odes to the power of death but by keeping alive and celebrating the memory of the dead in all its detailed particularity. The medical battle against mortality always ends in defeat, yet we do not spare resources and resourcefulness in laboring to avert the inevitable. Why should we be resigned to the victory of forgetfulness and nescience? Why is it essential for our Reuven to keep in mind Shimon's depressing preoccupation? Why think of the futility of the undertaking rather than concentrate wholly on our work of construction, striving, in however fragmentary, however fragile, a manner, to preserve the past in all its detailed particularity?

My answer, in a word, is that being aware of how little our work of recollecting can accomplish, against the infinite mysteriousness of who it is we seek to remember, not only affects our emotional life, as significant

as this might be, but guides our practical endeavors too, in important ways. I hope these will become clear further on. Meanwhile, let us consider some of the factors, inherent in the human condition or to specific social circumstances, engendering especially intense resistance to what seems to be a plain fact: that much of what is most valuable in the legacy of each human being, even the best situated of us, is irremediably lost.

II

As already noted, the conviction that each human being is unique and of infinite value entails that losing any significant part of his or her contribution is an unfathomable tragedy. This is true of our own mortality: none of us is easily reconciled to the notion that matters of great importance to us, experiences that have marked us, knowledge we have gained, will one day be consigned to oblivion, escaping even those closest to us, or misunderstood by them. Upon examination, it turns out that almost all of us do not fully reveal our inner lives to others. There are a multitude of explanations for our reticence, some more dignified and honorable than others. Nevertheless, and in spite of the evidence to the contrary, we like to think that we would like to reveal ourselves completely, at least to those we care about, and it troubles us that so much is likely to remain hidden, particularly what we consider the best in us. If the image of God is honored in the reticence of intimacy and in the preservation of our privacy, it is equally honored in the desire to communicate, the desire to be known.

At the moment R. Ada b. Ahava confronted the death of Rav, his perspective was not that of the person who has failed to reveal himself but that of the failed student. What broke his spirit was that Rav had absconded with so much left undone, so much left unsaid to his students. His desire was impossible and absurd. The thought of magnificence biting the dust, the skull that uttered wisdom now stopping a bung hole, its achievements and experiences consigned to oblivion, threatens our conviction that the human being is the image of God and bears infinite significance, so it seems to us. Yet the very absurdity of our quest deepens its significance. That a person whom we saw and conversed with and learned from for many years, a person with a public identity, seemingly open to our inspection, enjoyed and endured private experiences of which we have barely a glimmer, a life that others think they comprehend reasonably well, are only the superficial expression of what belongs in the “inner chambers” of the human personality and will forever remain secret, testifies

TRADITION

more than a hundred witnesses to the transcendence and mystery of the human being. The human world is not arranged as we would like it; it defeats our efforts to bring it under our intellectual and experiential control. Despairing of knowledge, we are brought to awe.

Thus we strive to reveal ourselves and to know others, while reality, refusing us success, reveals a deeper truth about the human condition. This dialectic is an inherent feature of human existence. What triggered R. Ada b. Ahava's reaction was Rav's unavailability to resolve a halakhic question. Eventually the information he needed was supplied by an anonymous Elijah figure: Rav was not indispensable. The tragedy, however, is not misplacement of propositional knowledge, or even the potential break in the transmission of Torah tradition. Every human being, says the Mishna, is a world, and the loss of that unique voice is the loss of an entire world (*Sanhedrin* 4:5). Nobody is indispensable. Everyone is irreplaceable.

Yet so accustomed are we to measure value and wisdom in quantitative terms that we are tempted to equate information with essential knowledge of another person, as if collecting every scrap of information, extracting every testimony, speculating exhaustively about every unknown or vague detail, would somehow overcome oblivion. This gives us one more motive to keep pushing for the full and exhaustive disclosure of fact. In the world of books, think of the voluminous biographies, running to thousands of pages, reproducing blow-by-blow accounts, virtual laundry lists, of their subjects' documented lives. Writers and old Zionist war-horses get more than their fair share of such mind-numbing recitations, perhaps because they leave behind so much paper. Tomes about creative writers are often comical in a boring sort of way: when it comes to the works of literature that justify their claim to attention, the door-stopping biographers can be relied on for jejune commentary. Assiduously piling up details and compiling hypotheses about what remains unrecorded is more liable to increase than to decrease our distance from the unique contribution of the individual.

Then we want to know everything about other people lest our ignorance brand us as naïve outsiders, unaware of what is really going on behind closed doors, who is doing it to whom, how it really is with the others against whom we compare ourselves and who define who we think we are and what we do. For the spirit of insecure curiosity, whatever it is that you don't know is the one piece of knowledge that you must have. The fascination of this curiosity should not be an occasion for pride. It represents the opposite of the passion to know and to be known we spoke of earlier. Yet we should not ignore the role it plays. On the one hand, the

quest for such information and insight is a source of much cynicism and an excuse for much gossip and spiteful talk. On the other hand, naïve innocence often incubates the most dangerous kind of corruption; lack of shrewdness kills. This spur to our desire for full disclosure is too important to omit though it requires discussion on its own.

III

How should the constant awareness of how much must be lost of each human life affect how we live? Insofar as the desire to know others and to make ourselves known affirms the value of human life, the inevitability of defeat should not deter us from trying our best to overcome it. Yet the knowledge that we cannot conserve or articulate everything of importance should teach us that the knowledge for which we quest is qualitative rather than quantitative. How we communicate is thus frequently more important, in this regard, than what is communicated.

What do I mean by this? “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak (Kohelet 3:7).” There are matters to communicate that we rightly do not want to leave unrevealed, and there are matters concerning others that we rightly cannot bear not to have revealed to us. Yet it happens that the time is not the right time, or the circumstances are unpropitious on our side or on the other person’s side. If the information to be conveyed is urgent, we determine to ignore these impediments and to say, or demand that the other person say, what needs to be said, disregarding considerations of intimacy and good taste. Imagine, let us say, a potentially fatal genetic disease. Discovering the family history—whether the person you think is your father is, in fact, your biological father, is literally a matter of life or death. If the opportunity to obtain the facts is liable to slip away, it is indeed “a time to speak,” and it is foolish to give it up in order to preserve the intimacy and mystery of the human personality.

The mistake, a consequence of the factors enumerated above, strongly abetted by the garrulousness fostered by the therapeutic culture, is to regard such urgency as the existential norm rather than the practical exception. To recognize the illusory and trivializing nature of this project will not reconcile us to the tragedy of mortality and loneliness, but will help us deal with the intellectual and emotional compulsion to seek out and divulge information, without regard for the cost to intimacy and dignity. We cannot, we ought not face the extinction of so much of value in ourselves and in others with equanimity, but perhaps we can better learn to endure it without impatience.

TRADITION

That knowledge is not worth having at any cost is, of course, the principle underlying the prohibition of idle gossip and *lashon ha-ra*. We all know how difficult, and yet how crucial it is to keep these laws. Nowadays, as noted, we are also aware of the harm that may ensue when stringency in this area suppresses knowledge that we should have. It is both motivationally and ethically pertinent to ask, regarding any kind of private information, whether we genuinely need it. Often the answer is no, and knowing this makes it easier to uphold our ideals.

IV

R. Shimon b. Yehotsadak, having heard that R. Shmuel b. Nahman was a great master of Aggada, asked him from where light was created. R. Shmuel whispered to him that God wrapped himself in light like a garment and radiated His majesty from one end of the world to the other. Why whisper, asked R. Shimon, observing that this image is an explicit verse in Psalm 104. To which R. Shmuel responded: "As I heard it in a whisper, so I told it to you in a whisper" (*Genesis Rabba* 3:4). What made R. Shmuel the master of Aggada when his interlocutor had all the information he needed to answer his own question? R. Shmuel was the master because he knew that it was to be transmitted in a whisper.

Presumably the mystery about the creation of light pertains to the danger of conceiving of God in corporeal terms. In our age this is not a great cause for concern; the Midrash need not be repeated in a whisper. If anything, we tend to conceive of God in overly abstract, impersonal a manner. Today, the great dividing line between secularism and Judaism runs through the concept of human dignity and what it means to exist as the image of God. If we are to make the religious way of living and thinking our own it is essential that we treat it as the intimate mystery that it is, with reverence and humility. Today we need the master of Aggada who can communicate *sotto voce* the secret of the human condition.