Erev Rosh haShanah – 5779: Emet and Elijah

“Les Amants du Pont-Neuf”

Erev Rosh haShanah
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Shalom, Shalom – l’rachok v’la’karov! L’shanah Tovah – to all of us who are distant, coming from far away, and all of those who are already present and dialed in – who are so near. As we again see each other, dwell in company and greet each other with the bountiful wishes for renewal, good cheer, peace, and success as we expectantly look to the promise of the New Year – I have a story to tell you:

It was back in the spring of 1991, when I was a college student in Poland, studying economics and literature. I had a friend visiting me for a week or so, and we went to Prague together. I was just on the cusp of reentering into serious engagement with my Judaism, and I couldn’t wait to see the locations where the writer Franz Kafka lived and worked and the legendary Jewish quarter. About Judaism, I certainly had what could be described as shoshin, beginner’s mind – where I was open to every experience, eager and lacking preconceptions about what could be. And I was entranced by the Golem.

The Golem belongs to the fabled stories of Prague. According to the most famous story, the Golem was a creature fashioned in the 16th century by Rabbi Judah Loew, who was known as the Maharal, from the mud by the Vltava River and given life by the word Emet, or truth, written on its forehead. The Golem was created to protect the Jewish people from the pernicious policies of Rudolf II, the Holy Roman Emperor. Long story short, after a period of serving the Jewish people, the power of the Golem short-circuited, and it was eventually deactivated, by removing the letter aleph from the word emet, a letter representing the Divine, thus leaving only the word meit, which means death. The now inanimate Golem was then stored in the attic of the Old New synagogue (Altneuschul), where it purportedly remains in a heap, to this day.

Back then, I earnestly believed in the literal existence of the Golem, and that my pilgrimage to the Josefov, the Jewish Quarter, would affect some kind of cosmic tikkun, or repair – and that being in such proximity to this mystical medieval creation, would continue to bring me closer to my traditions and identity. So, I was dumbfounded and certainly aggrieved when my anticipated fantastic encounter with the Golem had arctic water poured on it by my more rational and levelheaded friend, who maintained that the Golem story was a myth. The conversation escalated into an argument, and ultimately, I was left alone on the Charles Bridge.

At the time, I needed to believe in the story, as a key element to my searching. How could there be no Golem, no protector of the Jewish people, no life borne from truth? How could truth vanish, just like that – a removal of not just a letter from the word, emet, but the entire name, itself? Truth must exist. This possibility that truth was erased, challenges the very essence of our tradition, which so deliberately teaches – there is an emet of din, of justice, an emet of emet, and an emet of shalom – and that these truths comprise the foundations of the world.

Years later, I watched as Stephen Colbert masqueraded in his reactionary guise on the satirical program called The Colbert Report, as he coined the word truthiness – the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on intuition or perception, without regard to evidence,
logic, intellectual examination, or facts. According to critics, truthiness can range from ignorant assertions of falsehoods to deliberate duplicity or propaganda intended to sway opinions.

Some posit that we have moved from this realization to an all-encompassing post-truth era, or a time of deliberate lies. What happens to our society when we put forward that truth isn’t truth – and that our muddy protector against propaganda that leads to our peril is not now lying dormant in an attic waiting to be animated, but that our defender and guardian was never constructed at all? Many of us here tonight have previously heard in this sanctuary the warning that Elie Wiesel has given – when words cease to matter, if language becomes bankrupt, all becomes impossible.

We are then living in the absurd realm of semiotics – or the confounding, impossible task of making meaning. We must learn the difference between expositional gymnastics that encourages relativism, and an awareness of life and meaning that transcends ourselves, from a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, who modestly taught – may I never use my reason against truth. There must be a Golem, however hidden, that can still be brought to life by a non-relativistic or ambient truth.

We are about to undertake a journey into the High Holy Days – an exploration and assessment of the world as we look to reconsecrate and imbue the world with meaning, once again. This is an action item of Rosh haShanah. With the experience of Malchuyot, we are to proclaim and act as if what we do matters. We are to depend on each other for inspiration and guidance, and we are certainly not to leave each other abandoned to our own devices in this sanctuary in this critical time. We are to re-trumpet our belief in truth, even though it may currently seem fragmentary and locked in an off-limits attic far away. As Franz Kafka has written – the truth is always an abyss. One must – as in a swimming pool – dare to dive from the quivering springboard of trivial everyday experience and sink into the depths, in order to later rise again – laughing and fighting for breath – to the now doubly illuminated surface of things.

Our tradition proclaims – that the seal of the Kadosh Baruch Hu, The Holy One, is truth, and that truth leads to holiness. We are to resist what is known as geneivat da’at, or the theft of one’s mind – which leads to mistaken assumptions, beliefs, or impressions. We are to uproot gas lighting in all places – psychological manipulation that strategically and intentionally seeks to sow seeds of doubt. Rosh haShanah is a willful restoration of order – a coronation the privileging of the emet of the emet – the truth of truth – a re-questing of hope, significance, value and subtlety in a world that as Anne Frank wrote, is “gradually being turned into a wilderness,” threatened by the “ever-approaching thunder.”

For some of us, we are past the point of no return. The foundational truth is irreversibly cracked in our world. For if the Golem is too inanimate – too quiescent to be revived — then there is another way — another legend that populates Jewish tradition which encourages us to choose life and to hang onto the power of possibility. Elijah the Prophet is a ubiquitous, enigmatic presence – one who flickers across our consciousness, usually in disguise, who allows us to see beyond the limitations and hazards of the present. Elijah is a fleeting presence that raises our consciousness and in an ambiguous and shadowy world, suffuses our lives with meaning and reminds us of our holy purpose.

Our Talmud teaches that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi met Elijah while the prophet was standing at the entrance to the cave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, “Do I have a place in the world to come?” Elijah replied, “If the Master of the World desires it.” As Elijah spoke, Rabbi Yehoshua looked about in wonderment. Perhaps it was only the echo from the
cave before which he stood, but later on when he would speak of this meeting with Elijah, he would say, "I saw two of us but I heard the voice of a third."

Rabbi Yehoshua asked Elijah another question about the future time: "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah answered, "Go and ask him." Rabbi Yehoshua was amazed: "You mean I could find him, talk to him—now? Where is he?" Elijah said, "You can find him at the gates of Rome." "How will I recognize him at the gates of Rome?" asked Rabbi Yehoshua. Elijah told him, "There he sits among the lepers whom you will find unwinding all of their bandages at the same time and then covering their wounds with clean bandages. The Messiah is the only one who unwinds and rewinds his bandages one at a time, thinking, 'I want to be ready at a moment's notice if I am called'."

Rabbi Yehoshua traveled from the cave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai all the way to Rome—a journey that seemed to take him only a few steps. He was not frightened by the strong gates of the enemy nor the pitiful condition of the lepers. Keeping in mind Elijah's advice of how to identify the Messiah in the most unlikely of places among the most wretched of people, he quickly spotted the one poor sufferer who was unwrapping and rewrapping only one wound at a time.

Rabbi Yehoshua approached him and said, "Peace be upon you, my master and teacher." Shalom Aleichem. The leper looked knowingly at him and replied, "Peace be upon you, son of Levi." Shalom Aleichem. Rabbi Yehoshua asked him, "When will the master come?" "Today," Hayom. said the leper.

Rabbi Yehoshua returned to Elijah in the blink of an eye. Elijah said to him, "What did the Messiah say to you?" Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "He said, 'Shalom Aleichem, son of Levi'." Elijah said, "Ah! As to your first question of me, he assured you that both you and your father have a place in the world to come." Rabbi Yehoshua said, "But he lied to me, saying, 'Today I will come.' Hayom. But he has not come." Elijah said, "No, he did not say that he would come 'hayom'. Rather, he was quoting a verse of Psalms to you: hayom im b'kolo tishma'u – today – if you will only listen to the voice.

Elijah continues to wander our earth hidden as a miracle worker, emboldening, reassuring and encouraging us to see each other past the titles and accruals of status – to penetrate beneath and move beyond the roadblocks that we put up to throw each other off of the trail – and to reveal our true nature that is lodged within the thick husks of our persona. Elijah is the ultimate truth-teller, the ancestor of those who cultivate emotional leadership to guide thinking and behavior in adapting positively to various environments. He is a healer that cures our maladies and our afflictions – he is a conveyor of more noble purpose.

Elijah could be next to you right now. Perhaps you will encounter Elijah in this upcoming year as you coast, and in your struggles – this Elijah who challenges you and deigns to alter and update the signposts that you read as you walk upon your path in this world. This Elijah who inspires us to do better and act better, because we are seen. Let us emerge from our narrow places – let us breath a bit more freely knowing that the capacity for apprehending freedom and meaning in our lives is ours. Each of us with the word emet emblazoned on our foreheads – let us read emet again as we live in this time and space. Each of us, coming from our unique, singular perspectives, knitting ourselves together to create a more whole truth. May we enable the hidden Elijah to reanimate our sense of truth – and allow us to lumber forwards imperfectly, as we seek meaning.

Shanah Tovah – our tradition teaches – v'chol ha'am ro'im et hakolot – and all the people saw the thunderings (Exodus 20:15). Since there was only one voice, why is kolot, thunder in the plural? Rabbi Yochanan answered – because God’s voice divided into seventy voices and into seventy languages, so that all of the nations might hear it…Come and see how the voice of God went forth to all of Israel – to each and every one in keeping with their particular capacity. To
the elderly, to the middle-aged, to the ones who are middle-aged and don’t admit that they are middle-aged, to the little ones, to the newborns – all adhering to their capacity. For God speaks to each person according to their tolerance and strength.

As the 20th century philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas writes – *it is as if the multiplicity of persons...were the condition for the plenitude of 'absolute Truth'; as if every person, through their uniqueness, were the guarantee of the revelation of a unique aspect of truth – and some of its points would never have been revealed if some people had been absent from humanity...The totality of the true is constituted from the combination of multiple people.* We certainly hear the thunderings, if we cannot yet see them. We are to encourage each other to be spiritual first responders to our current dilemma.

Standing there in Prague alone on the Charles Bridge in 1991, I felt bereft, having had the possibility of an active, contemporary Golem diminished in my mind. And yet, I was taught a most powerful lesson by the one who I am now convinced was Elijah in disguise. The Golem is not holed up in some mythologized attic – rather it resides with me, and with each of us – ready to act. *Elohai nishama she'natat bi tehora hi.* The breath, the soul, that you have given me God, is pure – you created it, you formed it, you breathed life into me – it is by your Divine will that I am spared the end of my morality – and I seek to breathe that Divine aleph, and to speak truth, to be honest, and to be bona fide. Each of us can be an Elijah to revivify each other’s Golem – encouraging all of us to consistently act with integrity and good will in pursuit of a practical, imperfect truth. As Kafka has also written, *not everyone can see the truth, but one can be it.*

Be the Elijah to awaken someone else’s Golem, and then, be the Golem to steady and protect this world. Let us welcome the arrival of the New Year with newly found spiritual limberness and pliancy. Let us dust ourselves off and come out of storage, each of us like the consenting and affable Golem, ready to offer our lives as statements against deception and evildoing. Let each of us be each other’s mirror, like a hidden Elijah – inspiring all of us to pursue an ethical justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God – in private as well as in public. In all that we see, say, and do, may we recognize the doubly illuminated surface of things – the Golem and Elijah – and with this awareness, may we be inscribed in the Book of Life for good health, renewed vigor, restored *shoshin,* beginner’s mind, and a gnawing spiritual hunger that may be both satisfied and rewarded in our holy community.

Shanah Tovah u’Metukah
Ketivah va’Hatimah Tovah