

KOL NIDRE 5777

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In Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Mermaid's Chair*, she uses a phrase that stopped me cold and made me enter into a meditation.

It was a phrase concerning a rather mysterious phenomenon: Grace. And for you Jews sitting here who think that phenomenon is particularly Christian, think again. The Hebrew for the term is חן is חנינה is חנן is חנון is חן וחסד is just חסד. There are so many variants because there are so many nuances by which grace comes upon us.

One or another of these terms shows up in many, many of our prayers, and also in names: חנן or חנון or יוחנן are all Hebrew names. The last, meaning "the Lord's Grace" is the Hebrew behind the German name Johan, or the more abbreviated English name John, the French Jean, the Spanish Juan, the Gaelic Sean, the Russian Ivan.

Every one of these names is well used in all of these cultures. All of us, even those of us who do not readily or willingly speak a spiritual language, crave God's grace; maybe even those not ready or willing more so.

Grace is when the mere human spirit is touched with the spirit of what is so much greater and more powerful, the spirit of God's energy permeating the existent world. We become larger, stronger, wiser as a result of this gift.

Sue Monk Kidd's phrase, when describing a deeply unsettled woman remembering times of purpose, energy and love. She says she could actually perceive "the musculature of grace." Musculature. So strange an expression with regard to grace, which is usually pictured as an illumination of light, or a fluttering of dove's wings, or a breeze that wafts through our soul. But is it always so benign a touch? Is it not sometimes more like a slap in the face, a punch in the solar plexus?

What is the mechanism whereby grace comes upon us? I was stopped cold when reading that phrase because it seemed to me that Sue had hit upon it exactly. Like the very Jewish image of God's redemption described

בִּיד חֲזָקָה וּבִזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה

"with a strong hand and an outstretched arm"

Musculature certainly seems like an apt image.

The Jewish and Christian versions of grace are not very different. For that matter, this phenomenon is described in all of the world's religions, each with its own vocabulary, but all describing a common human experience. We all have been grabbed by power and made to see. We have all been shaken up by the divine fist and realized we have become complacent when there is work to do.

Again, those of us who do not readily or willingly speak a spiritual language might chalk this up to a mere psychological phenomenon. If that makes you happier, then let it be so. But really, grace is not psychological, or merely psychological, it does not emerge from the mind alone. It is bigger than us, it is an intersection of the human with the divine.

To bring in a Christian song, that might as well be a Jewish song,

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found,
Was blind, but now I see."

OK, Jews are generally less willing than Christians to refer to themselves as wretches, but that doesn't mean we, in fact, are actually less so. The song refers to redemption: that what had less value now has greater value; that what floundering about unseeing now has a sense of direction. But again, is this grace a flutter of wings or a shaft of light? Or is it something more muscular?

For Jews, and for many others, the answer is very clear. Grace itself may come upon us without warning and without being earned. But we earn it afterwards. The result of being awakened, of having one's eyes opened is not smug religious self-righteousness, if it is, the gift was wasted, and a wretch one still remains.

The result of grace is sweat, action, movement, service. It is going into the world and making it better. It is **תיקון עולם**, fixing the world. It is **צדקה, צדק, צדקות**. It is that balancing of vital forces in the world wherein those with more help those with less. Whether it be in the realm of justice **צדק**; the realm of interpersonal goodness **צדקות**; or the realm of monetary help, charity **צדקה**. All of these words in Hebrew are really the same. It is the mechanism, the musculature, whereby we fix the world. The end result of having been blessed with seeing when one has been blind. Of having been found, when one has been lost.

This seeing of the erstwhile blind and finding of the erstwhile lost is the essence of so much in Judaism. If a heathen had come up to me, instead of Hillel, and asked to explain all of Torah while standing on one foot, I may have answered this way. But then again, Hillel did. He said:

**אם אין אני לי מי לי?
וכשאני לעצמי מה אני?
ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי?**

If I am not for me, who will be for me?
And when I am being for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?

Note the second line carefully: "and when I am being for myself, what am I?" This does not mean sometimes I work for myself and sometimes I work for others. Any half-educated clod could have said that. Hillel means that when I am myself, that self must not be the petty, egoistic self that a bad reading of the first line would imply. It means that my very self is so large and mighty that in doing for myself I *am* doing for others. That the very distinction between selfish and selfless has blurred.

That we are all in this together. That we are our brothers' keepers. That the work we do to benefit ourselves be the sort of work that benefits the world.

A temporary change of subject matter (that really isn't).

In 1944 the United States built a refugee camp in Oswego, NY for Jews who had escaped Nazi death, but were in danger for their lives. 982 refugees were admitted. Five million Jews were already dead, several million more were fleeing anywhere to escape the Nazis, and we generously allowed not quite a thousand into our country.

In an upcoming Thursday Night Live event, we will see a film about the St. Louis, a ship with 937 Jews looking for asylum. They did not receive it. They had valid visa for Cuba, but were denied entry. Frantic calls to the US State Department went unheeded. Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, advised Roosevelt not to accept the Jews. Captain Schroder considered running the ship aground along the Florida coast to allow the refugees to escape, but US Coast Guard vessels prevented such a move. After the St. Louis was turned away from the United States, many in Canada tried to persuade Prime Minister Mackenzie King to provide sanctuary to the ship's passengers. But Canadian immigration official Frederick Blair persuaded the Prime Minister not to intervene.

Back in European waters, several nations agreed to take in a couple of hundred refugees each. Most ended up in countries that, the following year, were invaded by the Nazis. As a result, many of these refugees ended up in Nazi hands after all.

As I mentioned in my *Sh'ma* article for this month, twenty-five hundred years before the infamous Dred Scott decision, and sitting there in plain view of the supposedly pious Supreme Court justices who made that decision, was the biblical law from Deuteronomy 23 (Portion *Ki Tisa*, which we read on September 17): "If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master." The reason is the same given in so many passages of Torah that demand that we take in the unfortunate, feed and cloth them. That reason? We knew what is what like to be a slave. And we need not remember our slavery in Egypt 3200 years ago to activate our compassion. We need only remember the far more recent Holocaust.

I am amazed that so many Americans who claim to revere the Bible as their guidebook for righteous living can turn their faces away from the plight of the refugees that the Holy Scripture itself says to embrace. So many who ignore the orphan and the hungry and the poor, when Scripture explicitly and emphatically commands us to care for them.

Apart from the original natives of this land, nearly every other American is the descendant of a refugee, whether of political or social oppression, or a descendant of a slave. And this is also not a memory that has to stretch back 3200 years, but generally less than three hundred years ago, two hundred, one hundred, and even within living memory.

Certainly we Jews have an especially keen memory of the plight of the oppressed, the war-torn, the battered and beaten, the refugees from relentless attempts to murder us. Any American, and especially any Jewish American must stand up to help those in similar circumstances. Really, any mensch must do so. And here we are faced with millions of refugees again fleeing for their lives. So far we have done a little better at sanctuary than the Oswego camp with its 982 refugees. But not all that much better. Meanwhile, Germany, the nation that 72 years ago was a *Führerstaat* murdering our people, has accepted 1.1 million Syrian refugees so far. I have seen several calculations for the numbers we have brought in, but 2,647 comes up most often.

But if for all my rabbinical noise-making you are allowing your fear of infinitesimal possibilities of danger hold your compassion hostage, and you simply cannot support the effort to bring in far more Syrian refugees to this country, then keep in mind that our Syrian Refugee Response

Committee is not, in fact, asking the members of this congregation to advocate for this. It is asking everybody to simply help feed, cloth and bring medical supplies to the refugees, wherever they already are. That is the full purpose of our event on October 29. It is not political. It is **צדקה**, **צדקות**, and **צדק**.

And, in the end, this is only one of many, many sorts of **תיקון עולם**, fixing the world. One manifestation of the amazing grace that sometimes touches us and blesses our lives. And can there be a better time to hope for grace and vow to do good than on this Day of Atonement?

אם אין אני לי מי לי?

וכשאני לעצמי מה אני?

ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי?

If I am not for me, who will be for me?
And when I am being for myself, what am I?
And if not now (on Yom Kippur itself), when?