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ANTIPODAL *ETROGIM*

AARON COHEN

One of the more interesting questions revolving around Sukkot is a question first raised by R. Jacob Ettlinger (1798-1871) in his 1836 halakhic work *Bikkurei Ya'akov*.[1] R. Ettlinger was the rabbi of Altona and author of the well-known Talmud commentary *Arukh la-Ner* and *Responsa Binyan Tziyyon*, among other publications. He was staunchly Orthodox, vigorously anti-Reform, and an adherent of mysticism. At the same time, Ettlinger was a modern rabbi in many respects: he attended university; gave sermons in the vernacular; and recognized early on the advantages of periodicals and journals, editing his own, *Shomer Tziyyon ha-Ne'eman*, for ten years. It is all the more perplexing, then, that we find the following, seemingly anti-modern, discussion in his writings.

In *Sukkah* 45b, R. Shimon b. Yochai is quoted as saying, "All *mitzvot* must be performed in the manner in which they were grown." Though there is some debate as to which *mitzvot* this ruling applies, there is no doubt that the *arba minim* are included.[2] That is why, for example, in fulfilling the *mitzvah*, the *etrog* is taken with the *pitom* side up, as it grew on the tree. But, asks R. Ettlinger, what about a *lulav* or *etrog* that grew in far-away America or Australia? From the vantage point of his native Germany, it grew sideways or upside-down, as it were. Can such a item, which sprouted in the antipode of one's current location, be used for the *mitzvah*?

> I was uncertain if we, who live in Europe, can fulfill the obligation with *arba minim* grown in America and Australia, located to our side and bottom [of the Earth], and vice versa. We know what the scientists write: their feet are opposite our own; they are prevented from falling into space because God placed the force of gravity on the Earth. Thus, if we were to use the species grown there, they would [perhaps] be [considered] the reverse of the manner in which they grew, because from our perspective, the top of the *lulav* or *hadas* grew farther down than their bottom. Or perhaps since [the four

[1] On Ettlinger, see Judith Bleich, "Jacob Ettlinger, His Life and Works: The Emergence of Modern Orthodoxy in Germany" (Ph.D diss., New York University, 1974).

[2] Rashi, in his commentary to 45b, lists a number of these *mitzvot*, including *lulav*, *hadas*, and *aravah*, but omits *etrog*. Rabbi Shlomo of Vilna, in his *Binyan Shlomo* (1:48), took this as an indication that, according to Rashi, the requirement of *derekh gedeilatan* can be fulfilled with the *pitom* either way. When the *etrog* is first budding, the *pitom* faces upward, but as it matures, it weighs itself down and the *pitom* faces the ground. Rashi—unlike any other rabbinic authority—would view either direction as valid for the *mitzvah*.

Rabbi Nahman Kahana, in *Orhot Hayyim* 651:9 (quoted in *S'dei Hemed* 3:381), refutes this interpretation of Rashi in light of *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 5:2, where a parallel version of the statement in *Bavli Sukkah* 45b is recorded simply and unequivocally as "The four species of the *lulav* are taken in the manner in which they grew." Furthermore, it is clear from Rashi's halakhic works that this list is not exhaustive; in his *Sefer ha-Pardes* (p. 240), he rules that the boards of the *sukkah* must be *be-derekh gedeilatan*, and in his *Sefer ha-Orah* (p. 115) he mentions specifically that the *etrog* must be taken with the *pitom* up. This last work was only published in 1905; there was no way for the author of *Binyan Shlomo* to have seen it. Still, this misrepresentation of Rashi's view persists; surprisingly, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv interpreted Rashi this way in his recently printed lectures on *Sukkah* 45b.

> species] are taken in the manner in which they grew in relation to the ground, this is called *derekh gedeilatan* [their natural manner of growth]. This [latter position] seems correct. (*Bikkurei Yaakov* 651:13)

R. Ettlinger concluded that it was reasonable to judge *derekh gedeilatan* not by the person, but by the growth of the *arba minim* in relation to the ground—which, of course, is the same all over the world—and *etrogim* grown anywhere would be therefore be valid.

But, as is often the case in halakhic discourse, the matter did not end there. Later authorities, as well as the burgeoning Hebrew press, picked up on R. Ettlinger's question. Fittingly, it was in "sideways" America where the discussion was picked up again.

America's first successful Jewish periodical was Isaac Leeser's *The Occident*, founded in 1843 in Philadelphia. In May 1847 the paper published an announcement by Rabbi Abraham Rice, which declared unequivocally that *etrogim* imported from the West Indies were kosher. This sparked a spirited discussion in the June issue, which featured a critique of Rabbi Rice by Menachem Goldsmith. Goldsmith countered that many of the Caribbean *etrogim* had been grafted with lemons, and therefore should not be assumed kosher unless sold by a trusted vendor or examined by a competent halakhic authority.

In a brief editorial note, Isaac Leeser defended Rabbi Rice's original statement. Of course, he had never meant to permit grafted *etrogim*; the rabbi was simply refuting those who claim that all American *etrogim*, grafted or not, were unkosher. As Leeser put it, "An inspection does not help; the land of their growth is their blemish." If that were true, Leeser argued, the *mitzvah* of *arba minim* would be unfeasible for all Jews of the Western world. Certainly, he concludes, we may rely on the halakhic opinion of Rabbi Rice that West Indian *etrogim*—as long as they are purchased from reliable vendors and are not grafted—are kosher.

A clarification by Rabbi Rice, as well as Goldsmith's response to Leeser, appeared in *The Occident*'s next issue. Rabbi Rice, for his part, declared that all the signs of discerning an *etrog* from a lemon were unreliable. Rather, any *etrogim*, including those of the West Indies, were presumed to be kosher unless proven otherwise. Since most *etrogim* are not grafted, the Halakha, based on the majoritarian principle, would dictate that these *etrogim* are kosher for use.

In his reply to Leeser, Goldsmith wrote that he knew what Rabbi Rice had meant; he merely wished that it was understood by the rank and file of American Jewry, "most of whom are not *benei Torah*, and they will certainly misunderstand his words." He expressed surprise at Leeser's assertion that some say all Western *etrogim* are unfit. "I have never heard of anyone in this country say so, but I have seen a responsum of Rabbi Jacob Ettling[er] in which he wanted to forbid *etrogim* grown in America." Goldsmith summarizes Ettlinger's question, dismissing it out of hand. If American *etrogim* were invalid for Europeans, Goldsmith countered, European *etrogim* would, for the same reason, be invalid for Americans—and this was a possibility he could not take seriously.[3]

[3] Goldsmith's response is puzzling for a number of reasons. First of all, *Bikkurei Ya'akov* is a commentary on the laws of *sukkah* and *arba minim* in *Shulhan Arukh*, not a book of responsa. Secondly, R. Ettlinger did not *want* to forbid; on the contrary, he concluded that the *arba minim* were permitted. Most perplexing of all is Goldsmith's

Below Rabbi Rice's and Goldsmith's Hebrew articles is another note by Leeser, in English, which effectively ended the discussion. He asked that any further comments on the matter be carried on in private correspondence. Yet some questions remain. Whom did Leeser have in mind when he referred to those who declared all American *etrogim*, grafted or not, blemished and unfit? Is this a misunderstanding of Rabbi Ettlinger's position? Or was it an unrelated stringency which viewed the citrons of the New World with suspicion, having had no tradition of *kashrut* throughout earlier generations? It is hard to say, and, as we shall see, the parameters of Rabbi Ettlinger's discussion were sometimes stretched beyond his original intentions.

Rabbi Ettlinger's query was an interesting point of discussion not only for halakhists; it also provided ammunition for critics of rabbinic authority. The *maskil* Yehudah Leib Gordon of Vilna (1830-1892) frequently used his brilliant poetic talents to ridicule the rabbinic leadership of his generation. The protagonist of his poem *Shenei Yosef ben Shimon* (c. 1880), a young, university-educated rabbi, dreams of modernizing Judaism, excising it of its later, unaesthetic accretions. He would permit *kitniyot* on Pesach, move the *bimah* to the front of *shul*, abolish the practice of spitting during *Aleinu*, and delay burying the dead. The same fictional hero also took an enlightened approach toward the *arba minim*: "*Lulavim* of America and its *etrogim*, he permitted them all / Despite being taken not as they grew / Their leaves in the ground and their roots in heaven."

In 1883, an article by Mordechai Jalomstein (1835-1897) appeared in *Ha-Meilitz*, a popular weekly *haskalah* newspaper. Jalomstein, a regular contributor, had immigrated to America in 1871, where he edited and wrote for a number of successful Yiddish and Hebrew papers. In this piece he sneeringly described how "our brothers," the Orthodox in America, reject the *etrogim* grown in California, despite their obvious superiority and affordability. Instead, they opted for *etrogim* from everywhere else—Genoa, Corfu, and Jerusalem.[4] Jalomstein criticizes the dishonesty of the vendors (perhaps also hinting at the naïveté of the masses), who would miraculously be able to procure even *etrogim* "grown from atop the grave of the *Tanna Kamma*." The Orthodox, he writes, were following the ruling of a certain disputatious rabbi, "the East Broadway *Maggid*," who had forbidden all American citrons. Jalomstein mockingly describes the flawed reasoning behind this ban: since America rests on the underside of the world, its fruits cannot be taken for the *mitzvah*. If an American *etrog* is taken with the *pitom* up, it does not fulfill the requirement of *derekh giddulo*; if it is taken *pitom* down, it is against the law codified in the *Shulkhan Aruh*.

This is essentially *Bikkurei Ya'akov*'s quandary, but applied, nonsensically, to the residents of America themselves. As Jalomstein presents it, the stringency is absurd. It seems incredible

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refutation. He seems only to be restating what Ettlinger himself already asked: can *etrogim* grown in one hemisphere be used in the other? Are American *etrogim* kosher for Europe and are European *etrogim* kosher for America? It seems likely that Goldsmith was writing from memory and had forgotten the details of Ettlinger's question.

[4] J. D. Eisenstein, in his 1952 encyclopedia *Otzar Yisrael*, mentions the articles from *The Occident* and *Ha-Meilitz* but conflates the West Indian *etrogim* permitted by R. Rice in 1847 with the California *etrogim* discussed by Jalomstein in 1883. This, as well as a number of other sources, were brought to my attention via this thread: http://www.bhol.co.il/forums/topic.asp?topic_id=2497782&forum_id=19616

that a halakhic authority would come to such a conclusion. Whether or not Jalomstein is faithfully representing this rabbi's opinion, and though he never mentions his name, the "East Broadway *Maggid*" did, in fact, exist: his name was R. Yosef Moshe Aaronson (1805-1875), and he was indeed a respected yet quarrelsome Orthodox scholar. His book of responsa from his years in America, *Mata'ei Moshe*, does not appear to mention *etrogim* at all.

A number of weeks later, a paragraph by Shalom Pludermacher appeared in *Ha-Meilitz* entitled "Do Not Mock." It is a brief anecdote, simply referring the reader to our *Bikkurei Ya'akov*, which was never mentioned by Jalomstein. By showing a halakhic precedent for Rabbi Aaronson's stringency, Pludermacher seems to have been issuing a sort of defense of rabbinic integrity.

Pludermacher reprinted this article some years later in more detail. He described himself and a group of friends sitting around Rabbi Mattityahu Strashun's table one winter night.[5] The conversation turned to that day's newspaper article—it was November 26, 1883—written by Jalomstein. They began to joke about it, but when Rabbi Strashun heard, he quieted them. "My brothers, don't mock—I recall seeing a similar question in a book by one of the great [rabbis]." Immediately he got up and headed to his library, emerging with a copy of *Bikkurei Ya'akov*.

Yet, in truth, Rabbi Ettlinger's discussion and Rabbi Aaronson's ruling are not parallel. Rabbi Ettlinger would not have forbidden Americans from taking American *etrogim*, or Australians Australian *etrogim*. It is strange to think of Rabbi Mattisyahu Strashun missing this obvious difference, or of Pludermacher failing to point this out.

In 1891 Rabbi Hayyim Hizkiyah Medini began publishing his *magnum opus*, the encyclopedic, nine-volume *Sedei Hemed*. He twice mentions our *Bikkurei Ya'akov*, adding an interesting postscript: "One of the wise ones of our generation" had sent him the following question: if the world is round, how is there any top or bottom at all? Given what we know about the Earth, how does Rabbi Ettlinger's question make any sense? Rabbi Medini deftly avoids answering the question; he explains that he has never seen the *Bikkurei Ya'akov*, only quotations of it in secondary sources. Perhaps, he suggests, someone who has read it will be able to clarify.

Perhaps.

In the meantime, we ought to bear in mind Strashun's admonition. In surveying the history of thought and ideas, we should not judge our predecessors—certainly not the truly great personalities of the past—based on our current knowledge and experience. R. Ettlinger, modern and thorough thinker that he was, harnessed his own scientific knowledge while formulating halakhic decisions. In retrospect, the discussion may appear naive or backward, but R. Ettlinger was operating with what was current scientific thinking and deciding accordingly. What, after all, is the duty of a responsible *posek*, if not to apply the methodology of Halakha to the situations and exigencies of the day? Rather than painting R. Ettlinger as quaint or outdated, his comments in *Bikkurei Ya'akov* 651:13 cement his legacy as

[5] For more on Strashun, see http://archive.li/8zfYu.

a broad modern thinker, a halakhist who applied all the knowledge at his disposal to arrive at an informed decision.

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Kohelet as Intertext

Elana Stein Hain

Kohelet is not only multivocal and internally contradictory; it also stands in tense dialogue with High Holiday liturgy. The intertextual conversation between Kohelet and this canon offers much in the way of understanding faith and the human experience.

Central to the *amidah* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is the third *berakhah*, beginning with the anomalous term, ובכן, "and so." In this *berakhah*, the petitioner makes four related requests of God:

1. That God induce all people fear God and to understand that God is Sovereign:

ובכן תן פחדך ה' אלוקינו על כל מעשיך ... וייראוך כל המעשים ... כמו שידענו ה' אלוקינו שהשלטן לפניך

> And so, place the fear of You, Lord our God, over all that You have made… and all who were made will stand in awe of You… for we know, Lord our God, that all dominion is laid out before You

2. That the nation of Israel and all who have hoped for God receive the redemption they have been waiting for:

> ובכן תן כבוד ה' לעמך תהילה ליראיך ... ופתחון פה למיחלים לך ... וצמיחת קרן לדוד עבדך
>
> And so, place honor, Lord, upon Your people, praise on those who fear You…the confidence to speak into all who long for You … the flourishing of pride to David Your servant.

3. That the righteous will be happy with the state of affairs, while the wicked will finally be quieted and lose their power:

> ובכן צדיקים יראו וישמחו ... ועולתה תקפץ פיה ... כי תעביר ממשלת זדון מן הארץ
>
> And so, righteous people will see and rejoice… and iniquity shall stop up its mouth … when You sweep the evil empire from the earth.

4. That God rule the world by Godself, in justice and righteousness:

> ותמלך אתה ה' לבדך על כל מעשך ... ככתוב ויגבה ה' צב-אות המשפט והא-ל הקדוש נקדש בצדקה
>
> And You, Lord, will rule alone over those You have made…as it is written: "But the Lord of hosts is exalted through justice, and God the Holy One is sanctified through righteousness."

The posture assumed in this prayer is a recognition that not all people currently fear God or know that God is Sovereign, (because) those who fear God lay unredeemed, while the wicked are empowered.

Only when the righteous get what they deserve and the wicked get what they deserve will all be able to recognize God as the true Judge. In fact, this passage starting with ובכן is a petitionary and reverent reframing of a passage in Kohelet (8:10-14) that engages the very same theme, the suffering of the righteous and the empowerment of the wicked:

> ובכן ראיתי רשעים קברים ובאו וממקום קדוש יהלכו וישתכחו בעיר אשר כן עשו גם זה הבל. אשר אין נעשה פתגם מעשה הרעה מהרה על כן מלא לב בני האדם בהם לעשות רע. אשר חטא עשה רע מאת ומאריך לו כי גם יודע אני אשר יהיה טוב ליראי האלקים אשר ייראו מלפניו. וטוב לא יהיה לרשע ולא יאריך ימים כצל אשר איננו ירא מלפני אלקים. יש הבל אשר נעשה על הארץ אשר יש צדיקים אשר מגיע אלהם כמעשה הרשעים ויש רשעים שמגי אלהם כמעשה הצדיקים אמרתי שגם זה הבל.

> And so I saw the wicked buried, and they entered into their rest; but they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city; this also is vanity. Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of human beings if fully set in them to do evil; because a sinner does evil a hundred times, yet lives long—though I yet know that good will come to those who fear God, those who fear before God. But good shall not be for the wicked, and like a shadow, the wicked shall not prolong their days—for the wicked does not fear before God. There is absurdity which is done upon the earth: that there are righteous people who are given the punishments of the wicked, and there are wicked who are given the rewards of the righteous—I say that this too is absurd.

Like the petitioner on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the state of affairs which Kohelet observes is one of injustice—ובכן—and so—he sees the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. Yet, unlike the petitioner, while Kohelet tries to retain his faith that Godfearers—יראי אלוקים—will be rewarded in the end, he still describes in frustrating detail to his audience the absurdity that he sees around them. Kohelet wrings his hands and calls out absurdity; he does not turn to God in modest supplication to ask for help.

Reformulated in the liturgical ובכן, we do not opine about the injustices of the world, but instead request that God change it: Give honor ליראיך, to those who fear You. And there's more to the parallel; one who studies chapter eight of Ecclesiastes will notice its discussions about who holds real power on earth—real שלטון, as echoed in the liturgy.
A few instances:

> **ב** אֲנִי, פִּי-מֶלֶךְ שְׁמֹר, וְעַל, דִּבְרַת שְׁבוּעַת אֱלֹקים.

> I [counsel you]: keep the sovereign's command, and that in regard of the oath of God.

> **ד** בַּאֲשֶׁר דְּבַר-מֶלֶךְ, שִׁלְטוֹן; וּמִי יֹאמַר-לוֹ, מַה-תַּעֲשֶׂה.

Inasmuch as a sovereign's command is authoritative, and none can say to the sovereign, "What are you doing?"

ח אֵין אָדָם שַׁלִּיט בָּרוּחַ, לִכְלוֹא אֶת-הָרוּחַ, וְאֵין שִׁלְטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת, וְאֵין מִשְׁלַחַת בַּמִּלְחָמָה; וְלֹא-יְמַלֵּט רֶשַׁע, אֶת-בְּעָלָיו.

No human being has authority over the lifebreath—to hold back the lifebreath; there is not authority over the day of death. There is no mustering out from war; wickedness is powerless to save its owner.

ט אֶת-כָּל-זֶה רָאִיתִי, וְנָתוֹן אֶת-לִבִּי, לְכָל-מַעֲשֶׂה, אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ: עֵת, אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַט הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם--לְרַע לוֹ.

All these things I observed; I noted all that went on under the sun, while people still had authority over people to treat them unjustly.

Who is truly sovereign? The human ruler, who is too powerless to overcome their own mortality? The earthly sovereigns, who use power to harm their subjects, what the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy might call ממשלת זדון, the evil empire? Or is it God, שהשלטן לפניך, before Whom sovereignty abides? The reverent requests we have been making over the High Holidays, for God to show God's Providence over the world, are actually supplicatory reworkings of Kohelet's bold and somewhat irreverent empirical assertions about life.

Arguably, this difference between Kohelet's frustrated faith and our liturgy's petitionary faith can be summed up in a word: הבל. It is the key word of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and it shows up again and again in our High Holiday *mahzor*. However, in our *mahzor,* הבל means fleeting and/or emptiness, like vapor: הלא כל הגבורים כאין לפניך ואנשי השם כלא היו ...כי רב מעשיהם תהו וימי חייהם הבל לפניך ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין כי הכל הבל– even the most noble among us have lives that are, in the face of God, empty and fleeting (part of *vidduy* in *hazarat ha-shatz*). It is an expression of modesty and self-effacement before God.

In context of Kohelet, however, the more convincing translation of הבל is "absurdity," as Michael V. Fox translates. It is an accusation that there is an absurd disconnect between what *should* happen and what does happen. This absurdity rears its head in instances of theodicy—when bad things happen to good people, or the reverse—and even in instances of mortality, where a person recognizes that despite all of their achievements, it all comes to nothing. *Hevel* represents not humility but indignation.

What does this dialogue between liturgical reverence and Kohelet's complicated and ongoing cycle of observation, outrage, and faith, offer us?

First, it offers validation, for many people do in fact experience both Kohelet's and the liturgy's orientation towards faith: both the ambivalence and anger borne by observing or experiencing tragedy and injustice and a desire to appeal directly to God as redeemer, to pray for clearer intervention.

Moreover, these attitudes need not be mutually exclusive: a person might experience these two general orientations at different points along the same path, within the same life, and even within the same challenging experience. Likewise, one orientation might lead to the other. Imagine the person who beseeches God directly for help, only to find herself or himself drowning in anger and clawing for tenacity in their faith when those prayers do not seem to have been answered. And the reverse—certain scenes in the Book of Kohelet depict a narrator shifting from ruminating about God's working in the world to recognizing God's Presence, even if Kohelet never actually turns directly to God to pray.

But the conversation between the liturgy and Kohelet offers something additional that is less about the sense and direction that the liturgy makes of Kohelet, or vice versa, and more about what Kohelet adds to the conversation.

What is most radical about Kohelet is not his empirically based understanding of life, though that is radical. It is not his clinging to faith even without full understanding, though that is challenging.

What is most radical about Kohelet is his never-ending oscillation between those two. Kohelet never actually makes peace with human limitation; instead, he comes up with a *modus operandi* for living a good life: he adjures his reader to fear God, but is simultaneously unwilling to give up his quest for deeper understanding (12:9):

וְיֹתֵר, שֶׁהָיָה קֹהֶלֶת חָכָם: עוֹד, לִמַּד-דַּעַת אֶת-הָעָם, וְאִזֵּן וְחִקֵּר, תִּקֵּן מְשָׁלִים הַרְבֵּה.

> And besides that Kohelet was wise, he also taught the people knowledge; yea, he pondered, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

For Kohelet, the continuous cycle of learning, thinking, observing, clinging to faith, and starting that process over again actually becomes the meaning of life. The medium *is* the message. Arguably, the liturgy on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is part of that cycle—the clinging-to-faith moment acted out in ritual and in speech directly to God. Kohelet, however, reminds us that an honest and profound life entails navigating this pattern over and over again, continuously reaching for an ultimately unrealizable understanding and returning to the keystone of faith.

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The G-d of Our Faces

Merri Ukraincik

I loved Simchat Torah as a little girl. The adults were so distracted by the singing and dancing (and quite possibly the refreshments) that we children had unique freedom to gallivant around *shul*, hoisting our apple-crowned flags like kings and queens with their scepters. If that wasn't exciting enough, the holiday also gave me the chance to meet up with G-d.

This was before I really understood who or what G-d was. At that point, I knew only that He was a constant yet hidden presence in my life. I talked to Him almost every day, but He came into view just the one time each year. Not that I could see His form or features. It was more a trick of the eyes. When we amassed beneath the *tallit* for the children's *aliyah*, we stood so close to the *aron* I could peer inside, and it was there I caught sight of Him, filling the space with His holiness.

As I got a bit older and more philosophical, I came to believe G-d's intention was not to show Himself to us, but rather, to get a close-up look at our faces. Such *nachat* for Him to see them aglow with the light of His Torah! Later, I broadened my perspective, convinced His visit had instructional purposes. Surely He'd come to remind us that we were created in His image and that we carry around the tiniest bit of His sacred light – something we should never hide from view, something that should inspire us to comport ourselves accordingly.

It struck me as curious that these particular memories came to mind during a visit to the New York Public Library this past winter. I had stopped in to see a display of illustrated New York City maps in the Map Room, though I was also in search of sanctuary for my chilled bones on a bitter cold day.

Anchoring the room were several expansive wooden tables, all worn and loved, teeming with memories of their own. I couldn't resist the tug to take a seat and write. As the chair legs scraped across the floor, my eyes caught the elegance of the high Beaux-Arts ceiling. The gilding. The rich, deep hues. The ornate plaster designs – cherubs, fruit, and dragons – and the sculptural molding from which the walls began their descent.

Perhaps it was because I was in the New York Public Library, drunk with the reverent scent of books and absorbed in the elegance of the building itself. Whatever the reason, the Map Room seduced me. It was a beautiful box I never wanted to leave. The word *splendor* popped into my head. Right on its heels came *divine*.

Why divine? I wondered, when what impressed me about the space was precisely its human provenance. In my imagination, I flipped over the many pairs of hands that had done the work, from the room's original construction through its restoration in the mid-2000s. I traced the lines etched by mastery and experience deep into their palms, their skills honed long before they applied the first drops of paint or gold leaf to the ceiling.

It is rapturous to stand before natural wonders like the Dead Sea, Niagara Falls, and the Grand Canyon, where the holiness is so tangible it leaves you breathless. Visiting them at sunset, when fiery oranges and reds and pinks ignite the horizon, only confirms the truth of it. But no team of craftspeople could ever have conjured any of them up. Their majesty lies beyond human reach.

And yet, G-d appears in the manmade as well. I have been moved to tears by the divine presence at the Hoover Dam, in the Tate with Millais' *Ophelia*, during the opening bars of *Rhapsody in Blue*. These experiences also heightened my sensitivity to the godliness in other places I never thought to look – in a display at a patisserie, in the beadwork of a wedding gown, in a hand-knit sweater. After all, G-d created us from the dust of the earth so that we might create, too, partnering with Him to complete His world.

This is the thought that ran through my head as I sat in the Map Room on that cold winter day. While artisans had carved, painted, and gilded the space into existence, it was G-d who imbued it with a soul. His presence felt so tangible to me in that moment, I experienced a sense of déjà vu that returned me to my little girl self, the one who gazed into the *aron* and saw G-d looking right at her. Of course, what I took for a visual encounter in my youth was a kind of spiritual intuition, a concept I did not yet have the words for. The certainty of our Simchat Torah meetings was based on my faith alone, and it was that feeling that washed over me in the library.

Epiphany or not, it was time to go. I packed up my journal and glanced around one last time, catching a sudden glimpse of myself in a glass display case. I spotted the dark circles beneath my eyes, the bump of a curve in my nose, the wrinkles above my brow, all in sharp contrast to the unblemished ceiling. I shrugged. Such cosmetic details were already old news, insecurities accepted long ago. My imperfections are as much a part of who I am as my fingerprint, and I've come, over time, to embrace them.

Outside, I paused at the top of the steps to take in the bundled-and-gloved crowd on the sidewalk below. We'd all become a cache of peering eyes, the divine presence in our differences obscured by the hats, hoods, and scarves defending us against the bitter cold. It was eerie, this near-absence of identity, an unintentional, temporary erasure that struck me hard.

For nowhere is our collaboration with G-d more profound than it is on our faces. When a man and a woman engage in procreation, they become artists of a sort, partnering with G-d to bring His master design to life – in infinite calculations of shape, color, angle, groove, curve, and size, in the beauty of our imperfections, in both male and female form. Considered together, our countenances are a patchwork quilt, the pixels that create the full picture of humanity as G-d envisioned it at the beginning of time. Therein lies our obligation to honor the holy spark of godliness in one another – and in ourselves. To do otherwise is to deny G-d's presence among us. In a way, it is to deny that G-d exists at all.

I hugged my coat to my chest as I began my descent from the library to the street, past Patience and Fortitude, the twin lions flanking the steps, and took my place among the throngs moving along Fifth Avenue. I lifted my face above my scarf, exposing it for a brief moment to the cold.

When I found my stride, I called out to G-d.

"Are You looking down at us right now? If so, what do You see?"

I shivered, the chill gripping my bones. I pushed forward while the *whoosh* of icy wind drowned out most of His answer, leaving behind only a trace of *yes* and *good.*

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