

Tonight we are wearing white
we are refraining from food and drink and sex
for the next 24 hours we will not anoint ourselves with creams or perfume
tonight we are pretending
that we require no physical sustenance.

As if we were angels

Tonight we call out the words Baruch Shem K'vod
which we usually whisper
because this is something that the angels say out loud

In our Jewish imagination
there are many different types of heavenly beings:
the word angel, or mal'ach, means messenger
which, in the Biblical narratives,
seem to have to do with bearing messages between the human realm
and the divine.
and there are also the angels of the heavenly hosts
the k'doshim, the s'raphim. the ofanim
(holies, the fieries, the spinning wheels)
these are the beings who are perceived in prophetic ecstatic visions
(Isaiah's, Ezekiel's)
and they are described as surrounding G0d,
praising G0d,
completely devoted to G0d.
One of the things we imagine
as we play out the drama of this Holy day
is that we too are completely devoted to G0d.

Being human, as we are,
we don't really know that much about angels,
but I know some things from high school:
My Jewish-thought teacher, Ms Shulman, used to scold us and say

“how can you be doodling and paying attention?
even angels can't do two things at once!”
So that's how I know that angels can't do more than one thing at a time.
In fact, some say,
an angels can't do more than one thing in its entire existence,
that an angel is defined and exists as its task.
(Some of you know about. . . Avraham's angels, each fulfilled its task and was gone)

The other thing I have heard that 'they say'
is that angels have one single leg, one foot
That is why (or one of the reasons why)
when we pray the *Amida* we stand solidly with our feet together
as if we had one leg.

When we say *Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh*
our feet are pressed together;
we are imitating the angels in the way that they praise G0d.

This whimsical anatomical tidbit about angels
is significant--
it says something, actually, about being human:
it highlights our essence that we do *not* have one leg--
That we are bipeds.
Split down the center.
Two footedness is our solidity, our balance,
but it comes from straddling two possibilities
it is our dividedness,
our indecision,
our ability to be swayed
our distractability
Having two legs personifies the richness and the pain
of being able to hold two opinions
with our two eyes blending to create perspective,
with our two hands--on the one hand, this
on the other hand, that;
with our two sides of the brain.
So, back to Ms Shulman,
yes, angels can't do two things at once
but human beings are distinct from them
in exactly that quality.
We *can* hold two things at once.
We can know how important it is to respect a boundary
and we can be breaking that boundary at the same time!
Going against ourselves, as it were.
Our having two legs
is symbolic of our inclination to sin
of our yetzer ha'ra
or, to put it another way--
of the gift of free will.

so really,
as we imagine ourselves to be angels tonight and tomorrow
what we are really imagining
is that we are--
just tonight, just today--
uneducable, unshakable;
that we are focused and directed

we talked on RH about the origin of sin
the urge to reach for things that are forbidden
and urge to destroy those things that are in our way, that upset us.
We talked about the Torah as a study of the nature of human desire:
The Torah opens with the tree of knowledge of good and evil

and the Torah ends full circle with Deuteronomy,
presenting the eternal choice between life and death,
between good and evil.

“Therefore choose life” the Torah says, “so that you and your children may live.”

Now, just as I finished saying that angels are single-minded
have no urges, no evil inclination,
I must mention a strand of the midrash that talks about the angels coveting.
When Moshe is up with the Holy One
receiving God’s instruction, God’s Torah,

the celestial hosts are jealous.

“Here we are, singing your praises day after day, hour by hour,
and your greatest gift,
your precious words of love you give to the *human beings*?!” “

God appeases them and reminds them that they don’t need it
“what would you do with the commandment against adultery?
what would you do with property law?
you don’t need any mitzvot!”

The teaching in this midrash is that Torah is not designed for perfect beings It is designed for sinners.

The five books of the Torah
can be read as each presenting a different interpretation of sin.

We talked about Breishit on Rosh Hashana,

Leviticus talks all about reverence and boundaries,
that not paying attention to edges is the source of sin.

Bamidbar talks about the power of negativity and communal complaining to pull us off the path of righteousness.

The book of Devarim, Deuteronomy
which we are about to conclude (just coming up on Simchat Torah)
has its own theory of sin:
Throughout the book, Moshe repeats the warning:
you will come into your own,
you will settle and live off the fat of the land,
and you will forget how you got there,
vyishman yeshurun vayiv’at.
“And Jeshurun got fat and kicked”

So the message of Sefer Dvarim is
that it is complacency that breeds sin.
Overabundance.
Blessing itself can be the source of turning away.

The book of Shemot (Exodus) presents a different formula,
where fear and scarcity – the opposite of complacency– are the fertile grounds for sin.

Today is Yom Kippur which is associated with the sin of the golden calf
this sin was a sin born of fear, of not trusting that things would stay the same the moment Moshe left.

It is in their fear and panic
that the people built a golden ‘replacement’ for Moshe or G-d.
like an infant who doesn’t understand that even when mother leaves the room she still exists out there on the other side of the door,
there was no trust.

This is the opposite of self-satisfied complacency.
But both self-satisfaction and an attitude of scarcity destroy gratitude.
You can’t be grateful when you don’t believe you have enough
you can’t be grateful when you don’t notice that you have enough.

The effective antidote to both of these modes
is generosity.
give when you fear you are empty and you will notice that you actually do have something;
give when you are full and you will notice how much you have.

once we recognize that it is complacency, fear, and complaining that make us ripe for sin, we can work to monitor and modify our levels of complacency and fear of scarcity.

The mantra of these holy days is
tsuva tfilla tzedakah
repentance, prayer, and generosity–communal giving.
These three avert the sting of our fate.
Tzedakah tatzil mimavat, says the Talmud
Generosity, supporting the poor and communal structures,
saves us from death.
Read this together with the verse from *Devarim* (Deuteronomy)
“Behold I set before you, the blessing and the curse,
life and death,
therefore choose life.”

Tzedakah saves us from death
in that tzedakah helps us to choose life again and again.
Tzedakah redeems us from complacency
it redeems us from the panic of scarcity
and thus it saves us from choosing evil, from our money turning into a curse, being hoarded because we are afraid, or being hoarded because we feel so entitled.

The communal giving that the Torah lays out for us is threefold:
level one is the level of the half-shekel
this is the level of belonging, of buying in.
it is a level of equality–the rich pays no more and the poor pays no less–
it is through the collection of the half-shekel that the census was taken in ancient time
it was through the funds of the half-shekel that the daily communal offerings were financed.

When the daily morning sacrifice was offered,
it was offered on behalf of all of Israel because all of Israel had bought in.

The next level of giving was the required tenth.
This was in addition to the required gifts to the poor.
There was a tenth of income that was to go to the support and maintenance of the temple, and the Levites and Kohanim who served there.
The tenth was not equal across the board,
it was much like property tax today that funds our schools—
those with more property give more to the subsistence of the public institutions.

And finally there is the third level which is not required in the same way that levels one and two are required
and that is the level of the generous heart. N'divut lev.
This is demonstrated in the building of the mishkan
when Moshe asked the people to bring of their cloths and gold and precious stones. The Torah tells us that they brought and brought until Moshe had to send out the word to stop giving!
This is the level of above-and-beyond duty.
This is the level of giving out of joy and love and devotion.

Everyone is capable of experiencing giving on all three levels—
The first is minimal and basic and puts rich and poor on the same level.
It is about belonging, “to each according to her needs.”
The second is about supporting “from each according to his means.”
The third is about love and beauty and connection: let me share my blessing with my community.
Even families who receive reduced dues can still contribute on this level. Our family receives a very generous scholarship from Noam’s school, and still, it feels very good to be able to send in a symbolic donation in honor of someone or something, just as a show of appreciation to this nurturing institution.
In fact, Jewish tradition teaches
that even those who subsist off of the communal coffers
still have upon themselves the command to give tzedakah.
No one is excused, even at the bottom rung.
Everyone has something to give.

I started off talking about angels—about the split down the middle that we humans live with—one hand holding the other hand giving.
In the Kabbalistic scheme this is the image of love and restraint—exemplified by right and left hand.
The right hand extends out from the heart and the left hand holds close to the heart.
Together, in balance, the heart is generous and heart is protected.
In the Kabbalistic scheme, the heart is the place of perfect balance between giving and holding, between right arm and left arm.
And the heart, in perfect balance, is a place that is not torn in two.
So tonight
as we pretend to be the angels whom we so resemble
let us find that place of perfect balance at our center

so that we don't totter off to the side of fear or off to the side of complacency.
Let us see ourselves as devoted and directed
on a path toward righteousness
from which we cannot be moved.
Amen