

Rabbi Ira F. Stone
Temple Beth Zion- Beth Israel
Shabbat Vayigash 5764
January 3, 2004

The Aggada of Insomnia

In a parasha filled with drama, the most dramatic moment and the central theme of the story is set forth in its opening words: *Vayigash Yehuda*, “Judah drew near.” With these words the theme of reconciliation is announced. Since the theme of reconciliation is also central to religious life in general and the Jewish notion of religious life in particular, it is appropriate to consider carefully what the parasha has to say about this theme. There is certainly much to be learned from Judah’s particular approach to Joseph. There is much to learn from his acceptance of responsibility and what it tells us about the relationship between accepting responsibly and reconciliation. The dramatic moments of reconciliation with the brothers and with Jacob all provide insight into this most common of religious activities. Reconciliation recognizes a pre-existing estrangement and addresses it. Learning to recognize the levels of pre-existent estrangements that the world bequeaths to us and working to reconcile those estrangements constitutes the bulk of what we can call religious labor or *avoda* the word we use in Hebrew for worship. At the heart of worship is the work of reconciliation. As we well know from the liturgy of the High Holy Days, this work is primarily among people and only afterward between people and God. Or, perhaps we might say, that the work of reconciliation between people and God goes through the work of reconciliation among people. It is this deeper insight which the opening phrase of the parasha initiates which captures the imagination of some of our classic commentaries on the Torah. Do acts enacted on the human level have consequences beyond the human level and if so, how? What are the connections between the human dimension and the possibility of other dimensions of experience? Can we imagine that the human dimension and the dimension beyond the human are actually co-terminus? Is there a dimension beyond the human or is the human dimension itself transcendent? That is, is human being already larger than mere existence and suggestive of a meaning that is larger than our experience of our individuality? This plethora of questions and the intimations of transcendence that are deeply embedded into our experience of the world, the sense that meaning means something that seems to precede any logical consideration of such a proposition, is often given its most exquisite

expression in the mystical literature of a people. The very difficulty of holding such thoughts in mind calls for a discourse less restricted by the rules of logic which usually govern our everyday discourse. As these questions multiply and take on urgency in people's lives, the attraction of mystical discourse grows. We have seen this phenomenon at work in contemporary American culture and contemporary Jewish culture. We have also seen this phenomenon trivialized and even abused; used as an excuse to escape the more troubling challenges of rationality. Yet, not to recognize the legitimacy of the questions that have given rise to these tendencies and to dismiss out of hand the literatures within the Jewish canon that address these questions is a mistake. It is, in particular, a mistake that has been made by the Conservative movement. It is one of the many reasons why those Jews who are searching for a religious home amid the chaos of contemporary secular society have not found it in the Conservative movement. Our inability to seriously address the questions of meaning that rationality and science, even a so-called Jewish science or *wissenschaft*, cannot adequately address has rendered us less and less relevant. We have become a movement that seems bent on attracting particularly those for whom the questions of meaning are too threatening to ask and for whom answers that are couched in a discourse that is less than rational are too destabilizing to give any credence to rather than those for whom the religious quest has become urgent.

If reconciliation is a perennial problem then the questions regarding both the pre-existence of estrangement and the possibilities for overcoming estrangement become very serious questions. And if the seriousness of these questions have generated a literature, popularly called Kabala, that might yield some useful insight into the nature of these questions and possible answers to them, then we foreclose this discourse in our community at great risk to our spiritual relevance. Yet we are all too aware of the abuses of this literature by contemporary fakers and we are all too sensitive to the pre-modern assumptions of much of this literature that we cannot abide. How do we use the literature meaningfully?

Last week I used an excerpt from the Zohar, the classic work of Kabala, in order to create a frame for considering the problematic of contemporary Jewish Studies. I did not, however, directly address the use of such literature within an evolving Conservative theological narrative or *aggada*. I would propose to do so today. As I do so I want to keep

in mind that the purpose is not to make kabala the narrative of Conservative Judaism. Rather it is to continue to build the Musar narrative that I have been attempting for the past month but by using another traditional source of insight and trying to integrate the use of such sources into our theological arsenal, if you will. Therefore, I need to remind us again of my definition of Musar and why I think it can become a central narrative for motivating serious Conservative Jews to embrace Conservative Jewish practice. I have said that such a Musar is characterized by the fact

1. That human personality is shaped by the tension between the *Yetzer Ha-ra* and the *Yetzer ha-tov*, that is the necessity at every moment to choose between our Good and Evil inclination.
2. That this choice is made possible by a commitment to *halacha*. That is, that our *faith* is that we have a law which reflects the Divinity implicit in making this choice.
3. That the Divinity of this choice is measured by the impact of our choice on the good of another, our neighbor, the other human being; those closest first, those furthest away in the course of time until time itself is transformed into Messianic time. This measuring standard, in turn, helps us to refine number 2 (our faith in the law) by number 1 (our choosing the good over the evil) and this is the ongoing project of Jewish life.

With these criteria in mind we add the fact that many of the deepest questions of life's meaning require an imaginative discourse which delves beneath the simple narrative of Scripture and we find among our Jewish resources such a discourse in the Zohar to which we turn now in trying to understand more fully the greatness of the weight implied by the Torah's description of Judah's drawing near to Joseph and the weight of pre-existing estrangement that this act addresses and how it does so.

So the Zohar begins its commentary on the words Vayigash Yehudah with an esoteric discourse beyond my comprehension let alone my abilities to transmit. However, in the course of that commentary the following incident is related: (my comments in italics)

R. Yehuda and R. Yose once met together in K'far-hannan, and while they were sitting in the inn there entered a certain man who had come with a laden ass. R. Yehudah was then saying to R. Yose: "Tradition tells us that King David used to

sleep fitfully, like a horse. If so, how did David sleep till midnight, and not waken when a third of the night was passed?"

The tradition holds that King David rose every night at midnight and sang his psalms to God. If he was a fitful sleeper why did he not wake up earlier, say at the third watch (around 9 PM)?

R. Yose replied: "When night-time arrived, David used to be sitting with the princes of his household dispensing justice and discussing the Torah, and afterwards he slept until midnight, when he would arise and remain awake absorbed in the service of his Master, singing songs of praise and hymns."

According to R. Yose there is no problem. David stayed awake until after the third watch doing business and studying Torah and then slept until midnight

The stranger here interposed, saying: "Is your exposition correct? Hardly. The real truth of the matter is this: King David lives for ever and ever. All his days he was on his guard so as not to have a foretaste of death, and therefore David, whose place is "living", only slept sixty breaths at a time. For up to the fifty-ninth breath the sleeper is still completely alive but from that point he has a foretaste of death...For at midnight, when the supernal holiness is awakened, the man who remains asleep in his bed without regarding the glory of his Master falls under the spell of death and is attached to the other place. David thus rose up to contemplate continually the glory of his Master, who was a Living One like himself, and never slept long enough to have a foretaste of death. He only slept like a horse, sixty breaths at a time." R. Yehudah and R. Yose came up to him and kissed him. They asked his name. He said: "Hezekiah." They said: "May you be strong and may your knowledge of Torah grow."

I love the fact that the stranger, the outsider, the interloper stands up to the Rabbinic authorities and challenges their interpretation of the problem, but that is not my focus this morning. Rather it is the remarkably important piece of theological thinking that the stranger recounts. If we dispense with the mythological trappings of the response; if we do not get hung up on the fact that when he says King David lives he is not challenging the fact that we all know, as does the Scripture, that King David died, but rather that he is referencing the fact that King David as a messianic symbol, as a symbol of the infinite and always surprising future still lives, then we are presented with the central Jewish idea for what the future must contain in order to materialize. What gives the future meaning? How does the meaning of the future impact our experience of life in the present? Or, to return to our original question: How does the reconciliation initiated in

parashat Vayigash resonate with the meaning of reconciliation and pre-existent estrangement more generally? The mysterious stranger of the Zohar suggests that the answer to all of these questions is contained in the messianic notion of sleeplessness or what I prefer to call insomnia. King David is precisely the messianic king because he sleeps lightly, awakens easily, hardly sleeps at all. The messiah is an insomniac. Sleep is a taste of death. “Shomer Yisrael lo yishan” The guardian of Israel does not slumber. God is living which means God cannot sleep. God’s Insomnia is a model for our own. But certainly not physical insomnia! Rather, moral insomnia. The serious Conservative Jew recognizes that he or she is responsible for the world. Despite the tendency to fall asleep in the face of this responsibility, to ignore the cries of others and their needs, we emulate God in staying awake. We use God’s gift of mitzvot to help keep us awake. We pray three times a day, to awaken to our responsibility. We are careful about our eating in order to stay awake to the responsibilities we carry in order to be, like God, living. We are aware that when we fail to be like God it is because we are asleep to these responsibilities. And then we draw near again. Like Judah, and like David, we draw near in order to be burdened with Insomnia though we are aware that we will fall asleep again. After all only the Moshiach can do without sleep altogether.