

Ground Hog Day

Yihiyu l'ratzon imrei fi, vehegyon libi lefanecha, Adonai tzuri, v'go'ali. We usually translate those words as "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, O God, my rock and my redeemer." Let's consider, however, the middle phrase, "v'hegyon libi," "the meditations of my heart." Both of the Hebrew words, hegyon and lev, are ripe for elucidation. Lev, which is the heart, is not simply the seat of emotions in the Hebrew Bible. It is also the place of the intellect. Hegyon not only means "meditation" but also "reciting" as in speaking repetitiously. So we could render the phrase as, "the repetitions of my mind."

What repetition of the mind is meant? The answer, very simply is Torah. Psalm 1 verse 2 says that the man who is truly happy, repeats Torah day and night. I am sure that right now most of you are thinking, "You know, sitting around reciting words of Torah over and over, day and night is not really my idea of a good time." I would suggest, however, that it is through repetition that we do indeed find meaning, growth, insight, and ultimately, even happiness.

Our lives, you see, revolve around repetition. I do not mean the repetition such as practicing scales on the piano or shooting jump shots to improve a particular skill. I mean the repetitions that order our lives. It is the singing of "Happy Birthday" year after year, marking the passage of time. It is the re-reading of a good book for the 7th time. It is the playing over and over of a favorite piece of music. It is not going to bed without kissing our loved ones goodnight. The sameness of repetition frames our lives.

Judaism is filled with the sameness of repetition. Traditionally a Jew is supposed to pray 3 times a day. While there are differences in the morning and evening versions of some prayers, most of what is prayed is the same for each service. Moreover, the cycle of prayers is repeated 6 days a week, with Shabbat containing its own set of differences. From week to week the cycle is repeated, with the same prayers repeated in the same sequences. The exceptions are the various holidays, which simply serve to mark a larger cycle, the yearly cycle. You can see a pattern – daily cycles within weekly cycles within yearly cycles. Jewish life comes around to the same points in time, day after day, week after week, year after year.

All of this is framed by a progression of Torah readings, which never vary year to year. The Torah is always read in the same sequence, with each holiday having its own special reading. So year after year, we come to the same passages again and again. It is cyclic. It is repetitious.

Most of us do not engage in the weekly cycles let alone the daily cycles. But most of us are very aware of the yearly cycles. Every Rosh Hashanah we blow the shofar, the same notes in the same sequence. Every Rosh Hashanah we read the story of the Akeda, the binding of Isaac, his near sacrifice on Moriah. Every Yom Kippur we begin with Kol Nidrei. Every Yom Kippur we recite the Ashamnu – several times. Every year we read the Torah passage from Nitzavim in the morning and the story of Jonah in the afternoon. This is the time of year for “Avinu Malkeinu,” and we all know how to sing it. Indeed, this time of the year would feel incomplete without it. This time of year we hear messages of bad

deeds, the need for repentance, how we are judged and how our fates are sealed. Every year, we go through the same Jewish sequence, over and over, holidays, prayers, Torah portions. It is the Jewish version of “Ground Hog Day.”

How many of you know the movie I am referencing? “Ground Hog Day” stars Bill Murray as an ego inflated newsman, sent to Punxatawny, PA, to do a report on the annual appearance of Punxatawny Phil. The groundhog’s annual appearance determines how many more weeks of winter can be expected. Something happens to Murray, and he ends up living the same day, the same routines, over and over and over again. At first he experiences the repetitions with despair, and even tries suicide as a way to escape the repeating day. After a while, however, he sees the repetitions as an opportunity for growth. He learns piano. He notices people in a new and appreciative way. He finds love. When he finally breaks out of the cycle of living Ground Hog Day over and over, He has become a different, more sensitive, more appreciative person.

That is an intensely Jewish idea. We engage in the same set of rituals, holidays, day after day, month after month, year after year. We read the Torah again and again, looking at the words over and over. Each year we come to the High Holidays, experience the same liturgy, the same Biblical readings over and over. If we do not hear certain tunes we feel incomplete, cheated. Do we look at this as a boring obligation, a trap into the same routine year after year? Or do we see the holidays as an invitation for introspection, for assessment, for growth? As Jews we declare at Sinai, “na’aseh v’nishmah” “we will do and we will hear.” Notice that the doing comes first, and then, if we are patient, persistent, and

attentive, the hearing, that is the understanding, will begin to follow. We live in a discipline of repetition that is meant to ignite the challenges of growth. As we revisit these repetitive markers, day after day, month after month, year after year, we are supposed to measure our intellectual, spiritual, and emotional growth.

For the Jew, the repetitious cycle of Torah reading is not meant to dull our minds into numb acceptance of the words as literal truth. Rather, we are to listen, and then question the words we read. That is what our sages have done for over 2 thousand years. There is a book containing commentary on the Torah called "Mikra'ot Gedolot." The name means "expanded Bible." If you were to look at a double page of Mikra'ot Gedolot, you would see just a few verses of Torah in the upper right hand corner. The rest of the double page contains the insights, comments and critiques of rabbinic sages spanning nearly 1400 years. They are conducting an intergenerational argument over what the Torah is teaching. Their insights are incredibly varied, intellectually stimulating, and stretch the boundaries of Jewish thought and belief. They beckon us to participate in an ongoing tradition of text analysis that leads to intellectual, spiritual and emotional growth. When we return each year to a particular Torah passage, we bring to that passage our experiences and insights gained in the previous year. With each insight, we are supposed to ask more penetrating questions about our text, to challenge the text. That is our "Ground Hog Day."

There is a Jewish folk tale that illustrates how repetition leads to questioning that leads to deeper understanding.

(Tell tale of Talmud kopf and two men coming down a chimney)

If you really had a Talmud kopf, you would question how it is that two men could come down the same chimney, one arriving all dirty and the other all clean.

What is the story really teaching? Do not accept any premise on face value. We are beckoned to question the very paradigms of our lives and the lives around us. Every year, as we listen to the story of the binding of Isaac, do we start to see ourselves in an aspect of the story? Every year as we listen to the story of Hannah's prayer, do we question the value of our own prayers? Every year as we listen to the words of Nitzavim, beckoning us to choose between blessing and curse, do we question the meaning of what is a blessing and what is a curse? Every year, as we hear the story of Jonah, do we begin to see our selfishness reflected in Jonah's? Each time we hear a story, we have the opportunity to write a different ending, one that will be our very own ending – an ending that reflects our values, our growth.

Once upon a time there was a man named Jacob. Jacob was distressed because there appeared to be no justice in the world. "Surely," Jacob thought, "somewhere in this world there must be justice." So he took to the roads, and began to travel, to look everywhere on a quest to find justice.

Jacob traveled in the big cities, but no where could he find justice. He visited many small towns and villages, but no where could he find justice. Over rivers, by streams, through farmlands, and on the highways; Jacob traveled, everywhere seeking justice, but finding it no where.

Years went by and Jacob had moments of despair, but did not give up his search for justice. By and by, he came to a forest. He followed a path that led

deep within. After a while, he saw an eerie glow off in the distance. He followed the path closer and closer to the glow until coming upon a clearing in the middle of the forest. In the clearing was a simple straw cottage. The eerie glow was light coming through the cottage windows. Jacob went inside.

There he saw the strangest sight. There was nothing inside but shelves filled with candles. These were oil candles in various vessels. Some of the vessels holding the oil were made of gold, a few more of silver, a few more of marble, but most were made of tin. Jacob could not take his eyes off of the glow of the rows of candles.

“Shalom alecha!” Jacob started as there beside him, seemingly coming from no where, was an old man. “My son, what are you looking for?” “Shalom alecha,” Jacob replied. “Can you tell me, what are all of these candles? I have been traveling for years looking for justice, but have never seen anything like these candles.”

“Know this,” the old man replied, “these are soul candles. Each candle is the soul of a living person. When the flame goes out, their soul departs from life.”

“Can I see the candle of my soul?” Jacob asked.

The old man moved deeper into the cottage, which seemed smaller from the outside than it was inside. Beyond many shelves the old man took him, until they came to a low shelf with a row of candles. The old man pointed to a battered tin vessel, with little oil. The wick would soon burn through what was remaining. Next to this candle was a vessel of shiny marble, filled to the brim with oil.

“Can you tell me whose candle that is?” Jacob asked.

“I can only reveal each man’s candle to himself,” the old man replied.

Just as Jacob was about to ask another question, the old man vanished from sight. A shiver went through Jacob as he watched his candle burn. To his right another candle flickered out, a wisp of smoke trailed off. Jacob thought he heard a faint, sad sigh.

Jacob looked at the candle next to his, brimming with oil, clearly a young life filled with potential, with a long future. As he watched his candle begin to gutter and burn, Jacob had a moment of insight. “I have witnessed so many awful things, never finding justice. Perhaps my perspective has been entirely wrong. If I truly believe that God is here, then all I must do is to live as best as I can and put my trust in God that all will be fine in the end. Adonai li, v’lo ira, God is with me I need not fear.” As his candle flickered out, Jacob left the world and focused on the nearness of God.”